

Oman's tourist facilities increased 7.5% in 2022

Our Correspondent
Muscat

New tourist facilities started in Oman's hospitality sector increased 7.5 per cent in 2022, according to the latest Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) data.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, an official of MHT said, "Oman has witnessed the establishment of many tourist and hotel facilities, green hotels and guesthouses in different governorates. The total number of facilities has grown to 658 in 2022, compared to 612 in 2021, up 7.5 per cent.

He added that Muscat has the biggest share of hospitality sector facilities - 210, including 14 five-star hotels, 19 four-star, 32 three-star, 34 two-star, 34 one-star, 69 hotel apartments, five guesthouses, two green hostels and one motel, followed by South Sharqiyah with 94 facilities, including 5 three-star hotels, 2 two-star, 11 one-star, 23 hotel



Muscat has the biggest share of hospitality sector facilities - 210 - followed by 94 in South Sharqiyah and 83 in Dakhliyah

apartments, five luxury tourist camps, five motels, 35 guesthouses and eight green hostels.

The official informed that Dakhliyah now has 83 tourist facilities, including 2 five-star hotels,

2 four-star, 3 three-star, 5 two-star, 5 one-star, ten hotel apartments, two tourist camps, 12 motels, eight heritage houses, 23 guesthouses and 11 green hostels. In South Batinah, there are 57

tourist establishments in 2022 - including 16 green hostels, 16 guesthouses, one heritage house, five motels, one tourist camp, seven hotel apartments, 6 one-star hotels, 2 two-star, 1 three-star and 2 four-star hotels - while North Sharqiyah has 44 facilities. North Batinah too has 44 tourist facilities, Dhofar 41, Buraimi 29, Dhahirah 26, Al Wusta 19 and Musandam 11.

According to the official, there are 30,203 hotel rooms in 2022 compared 29,056 in 2021.

Meanwhile, revenues of 3-5 star hotels surged 96.6 per cent to RO138,205,000 this year till the end of October compared to the corresponding period in 2021 according to the monthly statistical bulletin of tourism indicators issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information.

The ministry is currently working to set up several projects to attract tourists to achieve the strategic goals of Oman Vision 2040.



The Morocco-Croatia third place play-off in Doha on Saturday (AFP)

Morocco wins hearts but loses bronze to Croatia

Shaddad al Musalmay
Muscat

Despite the heartbreak of not making it to the World Cup finals, Morocco which lost the third place tie for bronze to Croatia 1-2 on Saturday, still won the hearts of all Arabs in the world.

For Morocco, the 2022 World Cup campaign started with Croatia in a group stage match that ended 0-0, and ended on Saturday with Croatia. "We are very proud of the team and we have been fully behind them. They made history and it is evident looking at what they have achieved during the tournament - lots of love and respect from all over the world," said Fawzia Balfarnan, a Moroccan fan based in Muscat. On Wednesday, the French ensured the Atlas Lions would not finish higher than third. They managed to finish fourth, which was unthinkable for most at the start of the tour-

namment.

Muhammad Bakuri, another Muscat-based Moroccan, said, "Morocco has changed a perception that prevailed for decades with regard to African and Arab football. As an Arab and African team, determination, will power and confidence has worked wonders."

Before the match, Moroccan coach Walid Regragui said, "We want to prove that we are one of the best teams in the world. We aspire to win the bronze and conclude our participation in the tournament with the best performance," he said.

Croatian coach Zlatko Dalic said before the match that his side would take the third-place playoff against Morocco as seriously as any other game. "Morocco was the surprise of the World Cup. They have proven to be high quality and have shown unity and spirit. They have great support and deserve to be where they are," he said.

Omanis abroad to vote in municipal council polls today

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Omani citizens who are away from the sultanate will cast their votes on Sunday for the third term of the municipal councils through 'Intakheb vote' available for download from app stores. The ballot will be cast

from 8am till 7pm allowing voters in various countries to cast their vote.

The app has a high level of security; the voter is verified in a safe manner through AI facial recognition, besides reading his/her identity card electronically without manual intervention.

Voting via the Intakheb app is

in four easy steps. After activating the Near Field Communication (NFC) feature, voters will take a picture of their ID card (both sides), place the ID card adjacent to the phone to read the data, after which the voter will take a picture of himself/herself. Next, a list of candidates will appear for the

voter to choose a candidate in the wilayat in which he/she is registered. The voter will then click the confirmation button to complete the voting process.

According to the Ministry of Interior, the e-voting process will enable voters in and outside the sultanate to use their phones to

elect their candidates to municipal councils for the third term.

The e-voting process stems from the ministry's keenness to apply best digital practices and to enhance use of modern technologies so that voters can cast their votes in a hassle-free way. For those in Oman, December 25 will be the voting date.

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60ft Christmas tree dazzles Muscat

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A tree at Al Falaj Hotel, an Aitken Spence Hotels of Sri Lanka, standing more than 60ft tall has been described as the tallest sustainable Christmas tree in Oman. It is made with 2,603 cola and beverage cans, 36,750 used light bulbs and tubes, and discarded curtain and iron rods repurposed for the inner structure.

According to Praveen George, general manager of Al Falaj, hotel



Almost all hotel staff contributed to the décor of the Christmas tree, which is mostly used cans and bottles, in their spare time

PRAVEEN GEORGE



staff conceptualised the idea in August and started making it in September. “Making the tree took almost four months. In a reflection of the sustainable theme of Aitken Spence Hotels, the idea was conceived in an internal meeting. Almost all hotel staff contributed to the décor of the Christmas tree, which is mostly

used cans and bottles, in their spare time.” The tree has been set up by the swimming pool and outdoor dining area and is lit up with different colours and eight lighting modes. Led by engineer Noel Anthony, the tree’s lighting mechanism is synced to Christmas carols with the colour of

lights changing to beats and songs. “Celebrations are often calous, impacting the environment with reckless use of things which are harmful to our surroundings. We are celebrating Christmas in an eco-friendly way, attempting to safeguard our environment,” George said.

Stars Cinema sees increase in viewers after VOX Ruwi shuts

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The closure of VOX Cinema Ruwi has led to an increase in spectators by Stars Cinema. Earlier called Al Nasr Cinema, the theatre was one of the oldest and most popular halls in the capital. VOX announced its closure in November.

Popular with movie buffs, both bachelors and families, VOX Ruwi screened films of several languages including Hindi and English. Its closure has left no options for film buffs in the area other than Stars Cinema.

Until recently, few Hindi and English films – barring blockbusters – were screened at Stars Cinema. The theatre mostly showed Malayalam, Tamil and Telugu movies. The closure of VOX Ruwi has come as a boon with Stars’ management now deciding to screens more Hindi and English movies than earlier.

An official of Stars Cinema said, “We used to show Hindi and English movies too, but now with VOX Ruwi closing down, we are seeing an increase in the number of patrons. These are



Earlier, we screened only blockbusters featuring big stars, but now we have decided to screen small budget productions too, considering the popularity of such films

STARS CINEMA OFFICIAL

mostly Hindi film buffs. Earlier, we screened only blockbusters featuring big stars, but now we have decided to screen small budget productions too, considering the popularity of such films.”

He informed that *Avatar: The Way of Water* which is now showing is doing very well.

Stars Cinema is the one of the oldest in the country. Located in CBD Ruwi, it has one big theatre

of 850-900 capacity and three mini halls with seating for 75-80 viewers. All four halls have three screenings a day.

Shakeb Aiyaz, a Pakistani salesman, was a regular at VOX Ruwi. “The sudden closure came as a blow. My family is in Lahore and on weekends, cinema was the best and most affordable way for me to relax. But thankfully Stars Cinema, which was earlier for South Indian movies, is now also catering to Hindi-speaking audiences.”

13 hotels in Dhofar booked for licence violation

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism has registered violations against 13 establishments for operating hotels without obtaining proper tourist licences in Dhofar.



A statement issued by Ministry of Heritage and Tourism said, ‘The ministry has issued violation notices against 13 establishments for running hotels without obtaining tourist licences in Dhofar governorate.’

The ministry called on all

unlicensed establishments to stop engaging in commercial activities until the conditions are met and to obtain the necessary approvals and licences in order to avoid legal proceedings in accordance with the executive regulations of the Tourism Law.

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PAN Emirates rebranded as PAN Home; new showroom opens in Bausher

Our Correspondent
Muscat

UAE-based furniture retailer PAN Emirates Home Furnishings has opened its new flagship showroom in Oman in Bausher. Earlier called PAN Emirates, it has been rebrand to PAN Home.

The new showroom was inaugurated by Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, new chairman of the Board of Directors of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, senior PAN Home officials including CEO and managing director Abdul Rahman al Shamsi, group finance director Mohammad Katawala, head of operations Bilal Dyob, head of design Hala Haddad and head of marketing Adriana Kostic.

Speaking at the opening of the new showroom, head of retail Asif Sayed said, “As we inch closer to the end of the year, we are excited to announce that, due to our remarkable growth over the last 15 years in Oman, we are expanding! Our new showroom



is in the heart of the city in Bausher.”

Spread over 6,000sqm, the new showroom is billed as Oman’s new flagship store and home furnishing destination. It will feature an extensive collection of high-end and urban designs. “The modern urban collection, along with its core collection curated specifically for Omani audiences, ensure that we cater to our customer’s needs and inspire them to explore new

possibilities as they transform their homes,’ a press release said.

On the occasion, Dyob said, “PAN Emirates Home Furnishings celebrates a successful business legacy of 30 years. Founded in 1992 by Abdul Rahman al Shamsi, it is hard to believe that this furnishing giant started out as a single store in Sharjah. Over the past 15 years, PAN Emirates has enjoyed great success in Oman. We are operating out of

three key branches – Al Hail, Salalah and now Bausher.

“We have a well-established customer base here in Oman. There is high awareness of the brand in the country. In our efforts to expand the brand, we are always looking for ways to reach new customer segments. Our diverse offering and the wide customer reach are the key reasons for Pan Emirates’ - now Pan Home - success in the region,” Adriana said.

8 infiltrators arrested in Al Wusta

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Eight infiltrators were arrested by Royal Oman Police (ROP) for attempting to enter the sultanate illegally on Thursday. ‘Al Wusta Governorate Police Command arrested eight infiltrators of African nationality on charges of entering the country illegally,’ ROP stated.

It added that legal procedures have been completed against them.



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Omani startup develops eco-friendly water filter

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Twelve Omani students created ripples, when their startup venture came up with an 'eco-filter' solution for potable water at homes.

While still in its elementary stage, the new filter is being further developed by Zulal company with eco-friendly items.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Sultan al Fulaiti, a member of Zulal, said, "The idea for the filter came after we made a survey on the problems linked to water filtration at homes.

"We figured out that a lot of families are suffering from maintenance issues. Eventually, we ended up having a system to separate floating particles through palm leaves filter and then the use of an earthen pot results in segregation of precipitation from the water before it can be used."

"While palm leaves are used to adsorb primary precipitation of the water, filtration through an earthen pot in the system will allow only the useful metals like sodium, potassium to pass through," Fulaiti explained.



Both the processes have been combined in one filter, he confirmed, adding that "we have created a prototype product and named it Maen filter".

"We participated in the Injaz Oman Competition, and have been awarded for being placed second in the 'Best Sustainable Product' category this year," the

Zulal team member said.

Talking about team's biggest challenge, he pointed out that it faced a lot of difficulties while establishing the company. "We faced serious challenges in finding the right sponsor and in finalisation of a laboratory for the testing of the filtered water.

"But with patience and determination, we overcame those." We have now started selling

our products to homes, mosques and other places, where available water filters were in used."

Of future, Fulaiti said, "Our filter will be one of the most useful and sought-after products in Oman for two main reasons. Firstly, we are the first Omani company to have a water filtration solution. Secondly, it is extremely cheap, long lasting and easy to maintain."

60mn years old meteor crater discovered in Mahout wilayat

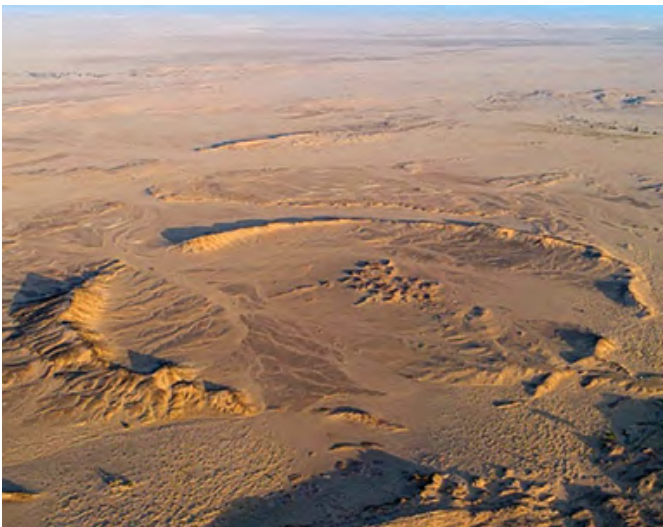
Our Correspondent
Muscat

Sultan Qaboos University, represented by the Department of Earth Sciences at the Faculty of Science, announced the discovery of a huge meteor crater - one of the largest shock craters in the Middle East - with a diameter of one kilometre in Mahout in Al Wusta governorate.

Prof Sobhi Jaber Nasr from the Department of Earth Sciences in Squ said, "The crater is 60mn years old. The diameter of the meteorite which caused this crater could have been between 50 and 60 metres to make it one of the largest impact craters in the Middle East."

This discovery offers a rare site for scientific studies to evaluate the overall impact of a meteor of this size on the entire area. It also grants Oman a special place in the study of meteoric impact due its distinction and geological heritage, where the ophiolite rocks are said to be the first and unique ones to surface.

These rocks absorb an estimated 100,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide annually, which help combat global warming naturally. Rock fragments at the site of the discovered crater show signs of melting and recrystallisation during the collision, during which sandstones quickly heats



The diameter of the meteorite which caused this crater could have been between 50 and 60 metres to make it one of the largest impact craters in the Middle East

PROF SOBHI JABER NASR

up to over 1200°C.

Analyses of unmelted rock masses show the presence of minerals such as calcite and quartz crystals with a distinctive pattern of parallel and flat cracks, indicating result of shock waves travelling through the bedrock.

Studies also brought to light the magnitude of the collision with the asteroid that hit the region.

On the other hand, the results showed glass fragments of teardrop shapes, and pieces of glass perforated with small holes resulting from gas bubbles.

These two features indicate the occurrence of a high-intensity collision, while geophysical surveys indicate distinctive vascular layered shape of the impact craters.

The site is expected to contain some economic minerals and will be an important site for domestic tourism, international science, and national heritage.

National campaign for organ donation to begin

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH) on Monday will launch a national campaign for organ donation coinciding with the country's own organ donation day, which falls on December 19 every year.

The 'National Campaign for Organ Donation', in conjunction with the Omani Organ Donation Day, will be launched in cooperation with the Omani Association for Organ Transplantation, said an ONA statement.

The campaign aims to educate community members on the im-



portance of organ donation - a humanitarian act, a generous initiative, and an appropriate solution to failures of organs such as kidney and liver, and other ailments from which millions of

people suffer worldwide.

Organ donations send out a great humanitarian message as the services offered by donors in saving human lives, and thus bringing an end to the suffering of patients encourage more people to save lives.

Organ donation is carried out according to controls and procedures determined by medicine, law and sharia'a.

The MoH decision in March last year was taken for establishing a national programme to organise the transfer and transplantation of human organs and tissues in the country.

Campaign to combat invasive birds launched in Dhofar

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Environment Authority (EA), in cooperation with several government agencies, launched a campaign to combat invasive birds in Dhofar governorate.

An EA statement said that the three-month campaign, in its first phase, 'aims to eliminate 30 per cent of the invasive birds in Dhofar by the end of 2023'.

It also aims to achieve an environmental balance that allows birds and other creatures to live a normal life in the main gathering sites of invasive birds, the statement added.

More than 70 volunteers from different wilayats of Dhofar gov-



ernorate are participating in the campaign in areas such as Salalah, Taqah, Mirbat, Sadah and Rakhyut.

Mynah birds, native to India, China, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal

such as Indian jungle crow and mynah, are increasing in Oman steadily. These birds cause widespread damage by destroying crops, eating bees, and transmitting diseases, parasites, and fleas to humans as well as animals.

The Indian jungle crow (*Corvus culminatus*) is a species of crow found across the Indian subcontinent. It is an opportunist and generalist omnivore.

The Environment Authority recently formed a team to prepare a study to check the spread of these birds and develop a national strategy. The authority has taken onboard an international ornithologist and prepared an integrated plan to bring down the numbers of invasive birds.



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CBO hikes repo rate again by 50 basis points to 5%

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) on Thursday further increased its repo rate by 50 basis points to 5.0 per cent, following the US Federal Reserve's decision as Omani rial is pegged to the US dollar.

However, the CBO has been consistently cautioning local banks not to increase lending rates for consumers as there is sufficient liquidity available in Oman's financial system.

The CBO's rate hike decision was made after the US Fed on Wednesday increased its key interest rate by another 50 basis points. The sultanate follows a fixed exchange-rate regime, and consequently its interest rate is closely aligned with US rates. As a result, the CBO's repo rate generally moves in tandem with the Fed's policy rate.

Repo rate is the policy rate that allows commercial banks to borrow short-term liquidity from the CBO as the lender of last resort.

'After the US Fed's recent announcement to raise its key policy rate, the Central Bank of Oman increased its repo rate for local banks at the similar rate of 50 basis points to 5.0 per cent,' the CBO said in a statement.

The US central bank on Wednesday raised its benchmark lending rate by 50 basis points in its all-out battle to tame four-decade high inflation. This increase takes the Fed rate to 4.25-4.50 per cent, the highest since 2007.

The CBO in its statement said that its monetary policy target is to sustain and maintain its fixed exchange rate. This policy is aligned with the structure and nature of the Omani economy.

'There are a number of advan-

tages for Oman that are derived from this policy, namely ensuring the stability of the Omani rial, mitigating capital outflow and promoting certainty among investors by removing exchange rate risk,' the sultanate's central bank said in its statement.

Following the lead of the US Fed, Oman has raised its key policy rate to 5.0 per cent in seven successive rate revisions in 2022.

The global economy is witnessing rising and sustained inflationary pressure and central banks around the world are attempting to address this pressure by hiking interest rates.

'While higher interest rates are expected to lead to lower inflation, in some cases, as related to consumers in high-income brackets, they could result in higher savings,' the CBO said.

In the Gulf region, most GCC countries raised their key inter-

est rates by 50 basis points on Wednesday and Thursday, following the US Fed's decision.

As most GCC countries keep their currencies pegged with the US dollar, their monetary policy is guided by US Fed policy decisions.

As per a Reuters report, Saudi Arabia and the UAE both increased key rates by 50 basis points. The Saudi Central Bank, known as SAMA, lifted its repo and reverse repo rates to 5.0 per cent and 4.50 per cent, respectively. The UAE's central bank increased its base rate to 4.4 per cent, effective on Thursday.

The central banks of Bahrain and Qatar also announced rate increases of 50 basis points to their key rates. Kuwait raised its discount rate by 50 basis points last week, from 3.0 per cent to 3.50 per cent, effective December 7.

OPAZ signs usufruct deal for fishing port at Duqm

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) on Thursday signed a usufruct agreement with Marsa Al Duqm Investments Company for the fishing port at Duqm.

The agreement aims to benefit from the lands of the fishing port and to develop and implement commercial facilities within an area of 300,000 sqm. The facilities will be used to serve fisheries sector and related commercial activities in Duqm area.

The agreement was signed by Eng Ahmed bin Hassan al Deeb, deputy chairman of OPAZ, and Eng Nabil bin Salim al Bimani, chairman of Marsa Al Duqm Investments Company.

As per the agreement, Marsa Al Duqm Investments Company will develop the infrastructure and superstructure to serve the port commercially, with the aim of providing services to investors in the fisheries sector and fishermen from the local community.

In a press statement, Deeb said, "The signing of this agreement comes within OPAZ's strategy to enable local and international companies to develop fish industries sector and related activities and to develop services and commercial facilities. Fisheries sector is considered one of the promising sectors in Oman in general and in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD) in particular, benefiting from the fish stocks available in the zone."



He added that this agreement aims to benefit from the infrastructure of the fishing port, support re-export sector, stimulate air freight traffic at the Duqm Airport through export operations of fish products, and create added value to the fish wealth in SEZAD.

The fishing port in Duqm consists of several facilities such as the main and secondary breakwaters and a 10 meters' deep basin to serve commercial fishing ships and it is located nearby a complex for fish industries.

Bimani said, "We are pleased to sign this agreement in cooperation with our partners to manage, develop and operate the largest fishing port in the sultanate. The port is the centre of activities supporting the fishing sector and the link between all activities related to fishing. It also constitutes a suitable opportunity for attracting investment in the development of support sectors."

"The port will contribute to supporting and developing research and innovation, and localising the value-added chain of fish products. The port also serves the fish industries area specialized in fish processing and canning," he said.

The fishing port of Duqm is the largest commercial fishing port in Oman, with an area of approximately 7.5 sqkm.

Marsa Al Duqm Investments Company is a consortium led by a number of Oman Investment Authority companies represented by Fisheries Development Oman (FDO), Asyad Ports, Al Wusta Fish Industries Company, the Omani Food Investment Holding Company and the French Port of Lorient Company.

IMF approves \$3bn loan to Egypt

Washington, US – The executive board of the International Monetary Fund on Friday approved a US\$3bn loan to Egypt, with an immediate disbursement of US\$347mn, the IMF said in a statement.

Egypt will benefit from the loan over 46 months under the Extended Fund Facility. The agreement is for 2,350.17mn SDRs, or Special Drawing Rights, an IMF unit of account based on a basket of five major international currencies, equivalent to about US\$3bn.

The loan was initially announced by the IMF on October 27. The financial support was granted in exchange for an economic program aimed at "preserving macroeconomic stability, restoring shock absorbers and paving the way for sustainable, inclusive and private sector-led growth," the Washington-based IMF said.

It mentions in particular "a permanent shift to a flexible exchange rate regime," as well as the implementation of a "monetary policy aimed at gradually reducing inflation."

The measures should also make it possible to reduce the public debt, "while increasing social spending," and to put in place "far-reaching structural reforms."

Egypt is expected to receive, through the EFF program, about US\$14bn in additional financing "from its international and regional partners," the IMF added.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has dealt Egypt several hard blows. As the world's largest importer of wheat, it has been hit hard by soaring grain prices. It has also lost a good portion of its Ukrainian and Russian tourists -- 40 percent of the eight million visitors in 2021.

AFP

Construction works for Ras Markaz terminal completed

Muscat – OQ, Oman's global integrated energy group, has completed the basic construction works of Ras Markaz crude oil storage terminal whose storage capacity is about 26.7mn barrels.

This oil storage and export project – carried out by Oman Tank Terminal Company (OTTCCO) which is part of OQ Group – is the biggest of its kind in the region. The project was built according to the international standards and 100 per cent nationally financed.

Ras Markaz crude oil storage terminal, which is located in the Governorate of Al Wusta, is one of the strategic projects in Oman, thanks to its location that mediates the Asian and African markets.

The terminal is scheduled to receive the first shipment of crude oil in the first quarter of 2023 to secure the needs of Duqm Refinery after the refinery was connected with Ras Markaz through a pipeline that extends for 80 kilometres. Eight huge



reservoirs were constructed at Ras Markaz for storing the refinery's oil.

Eng Salem Marhoon al Hashemi, general manager of the project, said, "Ras Markaz crude oil storage terminal aims to store and mix all kinds of crude oil in large quantities. The project has very advanced infrastructure that is capable to meet the needs of local and international markets."

He added, "We aspire to turn this terminal into the biggest project for storing crude oil in the Middle East to become an important international hub for trading

crude oil thanks to its strategic location overlooking the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean. This project will cement the position of Oman as a main hub for storing oil in the region."

Hashemi explained, "Oman relies currently on Mina Al Fahh in exporting crude oil. Therefore, the addition of Ras Markaz boosts the strategic importance of securing the export of crude oil abroad due to its distinguished location. The terminal is located outside the Strait of Hormuz. This encourages many investors to perform the businesses of im-

porting, storing, exporting and mixing crude oil. Additionally, it will provide an added value for mixing different kinds of oil with the Omani crude oil."

He pointed out that the area of the current completed first phase of the project is 10 sqkm approximately with a capacity of about 26.7mn barrels. Hashemi also explained that the total area allocated for the project is 40 sqkm, which is customized to store up to about 200mn barrels of oil. The company will increase its capacity according to the growing demand from investors.

The general manager of the project added that the project consists of two parts, the first of which includes marine works and has been completely executed. This part comprises of the floating import and export terminal, which is about 7km offshore, along with two pipelines with a diameter of 42 inches, in addition to the systems associated with it. The second part of the project includes constructing the oil

pumping systems, water treatment systems, the construction of reservoirs, the power stations network and other associated systems.

Hashemi further said that the floating import and export terminal was built to receive the biggest oil tankers in the world. He explained that the terminal was connected with four main pumps to push crude oil to the storage area, which is located at an altitude of more than 100 meters from sea level. The site is ready to add additional pumps to keep pace with the demand for oil storage at the station whenever a need for expansion arises.

HashemSoi concluded that the storage period and selection of services are subject to technical considerations and the preferences of investors as well as oil trading and marketing companies. He stressed that the storage of crude oil primarily follows the standards set locally and globally.

ONA

UN says 14mn tonnes of grain exported from Ukraine

Geneva, Switzerland – More than 14mn tonnes of grain have been exported from Ukraine under the Black Sea deal with Russia, easing global food prices, the United Nations said Thursday.

Rebeca Grynspan, head of the UN's trade and development agency UNCTAD which helped broker the Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI), said it had reduced world food prices for seven straight months.

"We have surpassed 14mn tonnes of food that has come out through the Black Sea Grain Initiative," Grynspan told reporters at the UN in Geneva.

"The volumes that we are talking about are very significant for the market."

Ukraine, one of the world's top grain producers, was invaded by neighbouring Russia in February.

Two agreements brokered by the UN were signed on July 22.

The BSGI concerned the export of Ukrainian grain blocked by Russia's war. It was due to run out on November 19 but was extended for another 120 days.

It has helped ease the global food crisis caused by the invasion.

The second agreement, between Moscow and the UN, was aimed to facilitate the export of Russian food and fertilisers, which are exempt from Western sanctions imposed on Moscow.

Exports down on 2021

Grynspan brushed off claims that



This file photo shows a truck unloading corn grain at a processing factory in Ukraine (UN)

grain exports from Ukraine were ending up in wealthy countries rather than developing ones.

The former vice president of Costa Rica said grain exports for livestock had to be differentiated from those intended for human consumption.

"Animal feed has never gone in the majority to developing

countries: it is more a developed country import," she said.

"Two-thirds of wheat exports are going to developing countries," which have been "benefiting widely" from the Black Sea deal in terms of grain for human consumption.

But the UNCTAD chief acknowledged that grain export

volumes remained below 2021 levels.

"We are not where we want to be," she said.

Grynspan is also concerned about a potential fertiliser crisis next year, saying the high price of fertiliser could cause an availability crisis in 2023.

She also said time was running

out, because the sowing season cannot be extended.

"That's why we are pressing so hard to be able to solve this problem as soon as possible," she said.

Fertiliser crunch

Moscow has complained that the agreement exempting its fertilisers from sanctions, which is due to run for three years, is not being respected. Grynspan voiced cautious optimism that progress could be made soon on Russian fertiliser exports, but did not elaborate on the negotiations, saying there were still obstacles ahead.

As part of the UN's efforts to combat global food insecurity through the agreements signed in

July, the UN's World Food Programme (WFP) is facilitating the shipment of 260,000 tonnes of fertiliser, which is being considered as a humanitarian donation by the Russian firm Uralchem/Uralkali.

The fertiliser is stuck in ports in the Netherlands, Belgium, Estonia and Latvia, Grynspan said, adding that the four countries had agreed to its release.

The first boatload of 20,000 tonnes of Nitrogen Phosphorus Potassium (NPK) left from the Netherlands on a WFP-chartered vessel on November 29, bound for Malawi via a port in Mozambique. The shipment has not yet arrived, Grynspan said.

AFP

US Fed downshifts all-out campaign to tame inflation

Washington, US – The Federal Reserve moderated its all-out campaign to cool US inflation Wednesday, lifting the benchmark lending rate by a half percentage point though warning there is still “some ways to go.”

America’s central bank has taken aggressive moves to ease demand in the world’s biggest economy, hiking rates seven times this year with interest-sensitive sectors like housing already reeling from tightening policy.

Its latest increase takes the rate to 4.25-4.50 per cent, the highest since 2007.

But officials signaled that their battle to cool the US economy is not yet over.

In a statement, the Fed’s policy-setting Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) said it “anticipates that ongoing increases in the target range will be appropriate” to reach a stance restrictive enough to rein in inflation.

A quarterly forecast released with Wednesday’s decision also saw policymakers downgrade US economic growth to 0.5 per cent in 2023, just narrowly avoiding a contraction.

They also raised their unemployment and inflation estimates for next year.

“Fifty basis points is still a historically large increase, and we still have some ways to go,” Fed Chair Jerome Powell told reporters in a press briefing after the rate announcement, and markets slumped on the central bank’s signals.



US Fed chair Jerome Powell

In their projections, policymakers expect rates would land higher than expected at 5.1 per cent next year, according to a median forecast.

“I wouldn’t see us considering rate cuts until the committee is confident that inflation is moving down to two percent in a sustained way,” Powell said.

'More evidence'

While consumer inflation eased in October and November, Powell said “it will take substantially more evidence to give confidence that inflation is on a sustained downward path.”

Households have been squeezed by red-hot prices, with conditions worsened by surging food and energy costs after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and fallout from China’s zero-Covid measures.

To make borrowing more expensive, the Fed has raised interest rates seven times including four bumper 0.75-point increases.

Asked if a “soft landing” for the economy remains achievable, Powell said this would be more likely if lower inflation readings persist.

Nancy Vanden Houten of Oxford Economics said, “The projections don’t explicitly call for a recession, although a rise in the unemployment rate by as much as the Fed now forecasts is consistent with a recession.”

The Fed lifted its median jobless rate forecast to 4.6 per cent on Wednesday.

But Powell said, “I don’t think anyone knows whether we’re going to have a recession or not, and if we do, whether it’s going to be a deep one or not.”

'Hawkish'

“The new forecasts are more hawkish than we expected,” said economist Ian Shepherdson of Pantheon Macroeconomics, referring to the higher inflation and unemployment rate expectations, and lower GDP growth projection.

“If policymakers implement all the hikes they now expect, they will have done too much,” he cautioned.

Analysts have warned that further tightening by the Fed risks cooling the economy at a time when it is already under pressure heading into 2023.

The latest increase suggests the Fed has “moved to phase two of its rate hiking cycle,” said Rubela Farooqi of High Frequency Economics in a note.

This means it is shifting from its more aggressive path to “a slower pace of rate increases until rates are in a sufficiently restrictive stance,” she said.

Powell added Wednesday that the Fed’s focus now is “on moving our policy stance to one that is restrictive enough to ensure a return of inflation to our two percent goal over time.”

Consumer inflation came in at 7.1 per cent year-on-year in November, according to government figures. “We think that we’ll have to maintain a restrictive stance of policy for some time,” Powell said. “Historical experience cautions strongly against prematurely loosening policy,” he added.

AFP

ECB slows rate hike pace but warns of more hikes

Frankfurt, Germany – The European Central Bank opted for a smaller interest rate increase of half a percentage point on Thursday but warned of more hikes to come in the “long game” to tame red-hot inflation.

The ECB has been lifting borrowing rates at an unprecedented pace in recent months to bring down record-high consumer prices after Russia’s war in Ukraine sent energy and food costs surging.

Following two consecutive “jumbo” hikes of 75 basis points, the ECB’s governing council agreed to downshift to an increase of 50 basis points at its final meeting of 2022.

The move mirrors the half-point steps taken by the US Federal Reserve on Wednesday, and the Bank of England earlier on Thursday.

But ECB president Christine Lagarde warned that inflation in the 19-nation eurozone was still “far too high” and more action needed to be taken.

“We have more ground to cover, we have longer to go and we are in for a long game,” Lagarde told reporters.

Interest rates will still have to “rise significantly at a steady pace,” she said, adding that the eurozone should expect further rises “at 50 basis-point pace for a period of time”.

Eurozone inflation eased in November for the first time in 17 months, partly thanks to efforts by European governments to shield consumers from energy price shocks.

At 10 per cent however, infla-



ECB president Christine Lagarde

tion remains five times higher than the ECB’s target.

ING bank economist Carsten Brzeski said the ECB’s comments were “surprisingly hawkish”.

The ECB’s closely-watched bank deposit rate – one of its three main rates – will now finish the year at 2.0 per cent, the highest level since 2008.

“The ECB is now more worried about tightening too little and would accept some short-term economic pain to bring inflation back to target,” said Berenberg Bank economist Salomon Fiedler.

Like other central banks, the ECB is walking a fine line as it seeks to raise borrowing costs enough to cool inflation without dampening demand so much it triggers a deep economic downturn.

The ECB’s latest quarterly projections on Thursday showed that the eurozone economy was expected to contract in the final quarter of 2022 and the first quarter of 2023.

But the ECB said the winter recession would likely be “rela-

tively short-lived and shallow”, echoing analysts’ expectations as households and businesses feel the impact of government interventions and gas storage facilities are fuller than usual at this time of year.

The ECB however slashed its outlook for economic growth in 2023, from 0.9 per cent previously to 0.5 per cent. Stronger growth of 1.9 per cent should then be achieved for 2024, it said.

“The war against Ukraine and its people remains a significant downside risk to the economy,” Lagarde cautioned.

The Frankfurt institution also unveiled its first-ever inflation projection for 2025, set to come in at 2.3 per cent.

While still above the ECB’s two-percent target, it’s a far cry from the 6.3 per cent inflation projected in 2023, followed by 3.4 per cent in 2024.

Both are higher figures than previously forecast.

Lagarde acknowledged the “substantial upward revision” on inflation, the latest in a long line as the ECB faces criticism for having consistently underestimated price pressures in recent months.

Lagarde added that the bank was keeping a close eye on wage growth, as workers demand salary increases to keep up with higher prices for goods and services.

The ECB sees wages growing “at rates well above historical averages, and pushing up inflation”, Lagarde said.

AFP



Argentina fans celebrate their team's victory after the World Cup semifinal match between Croatia and Argentina at the Obelisk in Buenos Aires on December 13 (AFP)

Qatar World Cup run masks Argentina's inflation misery

Buenos Aires, Argentina – Argentina’s economy may be sinking but the entire country is buoyant, basking in the elation of its football team led by iconic captain Lionel Messi reaching the World Cup final.

The dream of landing Argentina’s third world title, 36 years after the last one, seems – at least for now – to have let Argentines forget their woes.

That number three seems significant today, and not just because Messi and his teammates seek to put a third championship star on the team’s blue and white jersey.

Sporting glory arrives at a time when many people believe the inflation that has wreaked havoc on the South American nation’s economy will reach a barely believable triple digits for 2022.

Last Thursday, the INDEC statistics institute published the price index for November, around six per cent, suggesting inflation, which already stood at 88 per cent over the last 12 months, is not decelerating.

Argentina has had double-figure inflation for decades.

But there is a genuine feeling that soccer success – and that Messi magic – can alleviate the pain of millions in a country where the poverty level is over

40 per cent.

Before the tournament in Qatar began, Argentina’s Labour Minister Kelly Olmos was even asked whether lowering inflation was more important than winning the World Cup.

“We must constantly work against inflation, but one month won’t make a huge difference,” she said.

“On the other hand, from a morale point of view, given what it means for all Argentines, we want Argentina to be champions,” Olmos added. “The Argentine people really deserve some joy.” Predictably, that provoked a barrage of criticism.

'A relief'

And yet Argentines crowd around television screens in droves to watch the team’s matches, whether in bars, homes, even a Buenos Aires ‘fan zone.’

Most of these fans could never dream of affording a ticket to Qatar in a country where the average wage is a meagre 66,500 pesos (US\$390).

“People are well aware of the problems” but football and the economic situation “are on parallel paths, they don’t meet,” Lucrecia Presdiger, a 38-year-old hospital worker, told AFP after Argentina’s quarter-final victory

over the Netherlands.

“Many people really need this joy and are making the most of it. But they don’t take it literally, they know it’s only football, they are perfectly aware of the problems,” Presdiger said, adding: “You shouldn’t take them for fools.”

For designer Tony Molfese, an Argentina triumph would be “a relief, a breath of fresh air, a joy, even momentary – and we deserve it.”

Olmos drew parallels with Argentina’s first World Cup success in 1978, when the country was run by a military dictatorship.

“We were under dictatorship, persecuted, we didn’t know what tomorrow held, but Argentina became champions and we went out to celebrate in the streets,” she recalled.

“And then we went back to the reality, which was unrelenting.”

Despite the great passions football inspires, it remains just a game, according to writer Ariel Scher.

“Football bestows individual and collective joy, but that joy is transient, it doesn’t eliminate the other problems of existence,” Scher, a university lecturer and football specialist, told AFP.

AFP

BoE lifts interest rate to 14-year high

London, UK – The Bank of England (BoE) on Thursday hiked its interest rate by half a point to 3.5 per cent, the highest level in 14 years, in a bid to cool sky-high inflation.

The increase was the BoE’s ninth in a row, while the amount matches a hike Wednesday by the US Federal Reserve.

“The Labour market remains tight and there has been evidence of inflationary pressures in domestic prices and wages that could indicate greater persistence and thus justifies a further forceful monetary policy response,” the BoE said in a statement following its latest rate call.

The hike was less than in November when it lifted borrowing costs by 0.75 percentage points.

The BoE on Thursday added it expects the UK economy to contract 0.1 per cent in the fourth quarter, better than its previous forecast for a contraction of 0.3



per cent. The UK government has said the British economy is in a recession that it expects to carry on into next year on fallout from rocketing energy and fuel bills.

UK inflation stands at 10.7 per cent, the highest level for around 40 years, with prices surging on supply constraints caused by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the lifting of pandemic lockdowns and Brexit fallout, according to economists.

Soaring prices are eroding the

value of wages, causing public and private sector workers to go on strike in an attempt to secure higher salaries.

While boosting savers, rising interest rates are increasing loan costs for individuals and businesses.

“To make matters worse, higher mortgage payments will come on top of all the other soaring costs – from food to fuel,” noted Sarah Coles, senior personal finance analyst at stockbro-

ker Hargreaves Lansdown.

UK nurses on Thursday staged an unprecedented one-day strike as a “last resort”, despite warnings it could put patients at risk.

It follows fresh walkouts by railway staff, while planned stoppages by passport control and postal workers spell Christmas misery for millions of Britons.

The UK consumer prices index eased in November from October’s annual inflation rate of 11.1 per cent, official data showed on Wednesday.

The BoE meanwhile began to raise its rate in December last year, when it had stood at a record-low 0.1 per cent.

Paul Dales, chief UK economist at Capital Economics, said on Thursday that he expected the BoE to keep on hiking up to a peak of 4.5 per cent early next year, as inflation remains at historically-high levels.

AFP

EU nations adopt 15% global minimum tax on multinational companies

Brussels, Belgium – The European Union on Thursday adopted a plan for a global minimum 15 per cent tax on multinational businesses, after leaders gave final approval following months of wrangling.

The landmark agreement between nearly 140 countries is intended to stop governments racing to cut taxes to lure the world’s richest firms to their territory.

“Today the European Union has taken a crucial step towards tax fairness and social justice,” EU economy commissioner Paolo Gentiloni said.

“Minimum taxation is key to addressing the challenges a globalised economy creates.”

The plan was drawn up under



the guidance of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and already had the backing of Washington and several major EU economies.

But the implementation of the minimum tax in the 27-nation European Union has already been delayed as member states raised objections or adopted

blocking tactics.

Most recently, this week Poland blocked formal adoption of the measure while arguing about unrelated measures, such as sanctions on Russia.

But at Thursday’s summit such reticences were negotiated away, and the tax will now come into effect across the block at the

end of next year.

Leaders hailed the decision.

Germany’s Chancellor Olaf Scholz said it was a “project close to my heart” and France’s President Emmanuel Macron said France had been pushing the idea for more than four years.

The global minimum tax is only one part, known as Pillar Two, of the OECD agreement.

The first pillar, which provides for the taxation of companies where they make their profits to limit tax evasion, primarily targets digital giants.

It requires an international agreement which is not yet finalised.

AFP

Range Rover Sport brings everything more for less: MHD

For the ardent Range Rover enthusiasts, here is a chance to own one at a special price, said MHD ACERE, the sole Range Rover dealership in Oman, while announcing a sales campaign where one can buy a powerful and luxurious Range Rover Sport model at a special price, for a limited time, until stocks last.

Additionally, every new Range Rover Sport owner will get five years or 150,000km warranty, a free five years or 105,000km service package, and five years or 150,000km road side assistance, it further informed.

Range Rover Sport, the company said, “spells sheer luxury and sportiness for cruising both on and off-road with greater élan” and alerted all enthusiasts that the offer is valid for 2022 models only, with limited availability.

Savings is one thing and the pure exhilaration of driving a Range Rover Sport over terrains like never before, is another - totally priceless. Especially when one is with family and friends discovering a beautiful country like Oman or beyond the borders.

Comes with the proper Range Rover chassis and the same terrain response system where it analyzes the ground you’re driving over and automatically adjusts the suspension, gearbox, and engine output to suit.

The car can easily negotiate almost vertical hills, muddy roads, and desert sands. It has a



computer that disconnects the anti-roll bars to increase wheel articulation. The sonar works as an alert when it gets too deep in huge puddles or a creek.

More power to performance - the Range Rover Sport is equipped with a supercharged I6 engine with 400HP that goes from 0-100km per hour in 5.9 seconds. The computer-controlled suspension fights body roll during the manoeuvres and the torque vectoring dictates how much power should be sent to each of the four driving wheels and when. With a racer’s silhouette and the feeling of dynamics, it is not just a head turner; it also has enormous 21-inch alloy wheels that ooze confidence on any road.

Surpasses all expectations on

features and design - everything inside accentuates the feeling of luxury and style. A progressive touch screen system handles all necessary functions, from navigation to phone calls. The Sport model packs more with ample space in the back for three adults to sit in comfort and a massive boot of 780 Litres, which magically turns into 1,686 Litres when you fold the back seats down.

Range Rover is the original luxury SUV and has led by example for 50 years, combining serene comfort and composure with an all-conquering capability. The Range Rover sport is the most desirable yet, mixing ultimate refinement with contemporary luxury and making every journey an occasion to be remembered.

The Range Rover Sport is an evolved vehicle with seamless technology that accelerates the pleasure of driving with impressive body control and sharp, responsive steering. The latest exclusive price offer that offers value for money could be one more reason to own the Range Rover Sport - considered as a true marvel of British engineering. The offer is valid for a limited period only.

Range Rover showrooms in Oman are located in Azaiba and Salalah.

MHD ACERE is primarily committed to supporting the growth of JLR brands in the sultanate through a significant emphasis on customer satisfaction and providing world-class after-sales services in Oman.



Sharakah outlines future vision for Oman SMEs

Sharakah, Fund for Development of Youth Projects, created by a Royal Decree for supporting the SME sector in Oman, recently attended the 18th annual meeting of the International Network for Small and Medium Enterprises (INSME) in Baku, Azerbaijan.

The International Network for SMEs, based in Rome, Italy, holds an annual general meeting to address diverse subjects and significant challenges that concern the SME industry besides discussing the achievements and goals of the Association.

This year’s INSME conference, with the theme ‘Empowering SMEs - Economic Diversification & Green Growth’, was held at the JW Marriott Hotel, Baku under the patronage of His Excellency Mikayil Jabbarov, Minister of Economy of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Other prominent international figures in attendance included H E Yves Leterme, former PM of

Belgium, Sergio Arzeni, President of INSME, Orkhan Mammadov, Chairman, KOBIA and Ali Ahmed Muqabil, CEO of Sharakah.

Hosted in association with the Small and Medium Business (SMB) Development Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan (KOBIA), the 18th INSME meeting took into account the current and existing international context for the SME sector; addressing high-interest rates, a possible recession, damages caused by natural disasters and climate change and global conflict amongst others.

Recognising that SMEs are essential to the global economy as a driver, contributor and employer, Sharakah discussed future cooperation and joint projects during the highly strategic meeting. On the role of SMEs in global diversification and sustainability efforts, Ali Muqabil stated, “The speed of energy

transition in any economy depends on many factors, such as the energy situation of the country, social and economic factors, etc. Amidst this environment, the incubation provided by multinational organizations and universities for SMEs has played a vital role in promoting green innovation by providing funds, closing gaps for research and development and acting as a catalyst in their integration of a green ecosystem as part of their ESG contribution.”

The two-day meeting included many sessions and discussion panels for the attendees to deliberate and exchange market expertise and knowledge. Sessions covered sustainability and energy challenges for SMEs, contingency planning, innovation and green growth, policy and response, annual general assembly as well as a fruitful matchmaking session to pair SMEs with potential investors and stakeholders.



NBO transforms multi-purpose kiosk to serve customers ‘round the clock’

Committed to innovative digital banking solutions, National Bank of Oman (NBO) has recently upgraded its multi-purpose and self-service kiosk, which serves its customers round the clock.

Located at the bank’s head office in Azaiba and now also at its Al Khoud branch, the secure and user-friendly machine is part of NBO’s continuous aim to deliver innovative and 24/7 digital services to meet the evolving needs of its customers.

The first of its kind kiosk in Oman enables customers to open an account, make payments and update their profile, anytime.

Moreover, and while it was already possible to print out debit and Badeel prepaid cards in less than 3 minutes, customers can now also request, replace and renew their existing cards.

The kiosk is integrated with the Royal Oman Police’s (ROP) system to validate users’ ID information, manage documents and make use of a number of other key electronic services.

Tariq Atiq, chief retail and digital banking officer at National Bank of Oman, said, “We con-

tinue to simplify and optimise the customer experience as part of the digital transformation in banking. Our state-of-the-art and interactive multi-function kiosk enables our customers to interact directly with the bank and utilise our digital services around the clock, without having to visit a branch.”

“We continue to explore cutting-edge and market-ready technologies and aim to introduce innovative solutions for the benefit of our customers and Oman, as we play our part when it comes to the shift towards a digitally advanced society as per Oman Vision 2040,” he added.

As a bank of firsts since inception, NBO invests heavily in innovative and customer-centric digital services like the constantly-enhanced mobile app, and its prepaid card Badeel, which, for the first time in the sultanate, is available to both NBO and non-NBO customers.

NBO continues to build on its portfolio of user-friendly solutions and make the banking experience seamless, inclusive, and altogether more enjoyable, the bank stated.

Omantel bags two awards at MENA Effie Awards 2022

Omantel, the leading provider of integrated telecommunication and technology services in the Sultanate of Oman, has scooped two awards for its marketing campaigns at the MENA Effie Awards presented in Dubai recently, attended by the marketing who’s-who of the region, said a press statement.

The 13th edition of MENA Effie Awards honoured Omantel for its campaign ‘The Future Shapers’ in the Branded Content and Entertainment category, and for the ‘From Imagination to Reality’ campaign in the Internet and Telecom category. Both were animated films that focused on storytelling through the

eyes of children.

Usama al Kiyumi, Manager of Marketing Campaigns Home & Enterprise at Omantel, said, “As the Effie Awards represent the pinnacle of glory in the world of marketing, we are ecstatic that two of our campaigns were recognised for their excellence. The recognition is a tribute to Omantel’s focus on creating campaigns that not only effectively market its solutions, but also contribute to boosting the brand’s reputation in the region.

“What is even more remarkable is that besides winning in two categories, we made it to the shortlist in seven categories, which is a testament to Omantel’s continuous strive towards excellence.”



tel’s continuous strive towards excellence.”

‘The Future Shapers’ was designed to connect and create a stronger bond with the future generation of Omanis, the youth. The animated film which communicates the history of Oman

Bank Muscat organises special event for customers in Duqm

Bank Muscat recently hosted a special customer meet in Duqm for its Asalah Priority Banking, Al Jawhar Privilege Banking, Najahi and Corporate Banking customers as part of its customer-centric vision and commitment to further strengthen its communication channels with customers.

The event in Duqm follows earlier customer meets across other governorates and was attended by Abdulnasir N al Raisi, general manager, Personal Banking, Bank Muscat, bank officials and a large number of Premier Banking customers, the bank said.

Welcoming the large number of attendees, Abdulnasir al Raisi said, “Bank Muscat Premier Banking is delighted to host our valued customers as part of our customer-centric vision and strategy.

As the leading financial services provider in Oman, he asserted that “Bank Muscat is keen to proactively work to keep pace with global trends and respond to customer feedback. Hence, events such as these go a long



way in helping the bank reinforce positive customer experience and helping customers realise their aspirations.”

Taya Eid Bait Sabaea, deputy general manager, Interior Regions, said, “Over the last four decades, Bank Muscat has been keenly developing many innovative and new products and services to benefit our customers. Customer feedback has been central to this process and we would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your continued confidence and support,

thereby enabling Bank Muscat to continue as the leading financial services provider in Oman.”

The event in Duqm helped the bank further strengthen its partnership with customers and get their feedback regarding new services, products and offers. Customers were introduced to Private Banking services and investment options as well as the full range of exclusive services and benefits currently provided to them within Asalah Priority Banking and Al Jawhar Privilege Banking.

In particular, Asalah Priority Banking customers enjoy a range of unrivalled benefits including access to a team of dedicated Relationship Managers, 39 Asalah Centres across Oman and a dedicated 24/7 Asalah Call Centre. Exclusive lifestyle benefits for its clientele include the Asalah Entertainer App, which has more than 3,500 ‘Buy 1, Get 1 Free’ offers in Oman and at international destinations as well as rewards of indulgence and merchant discounts across fine dining, entertainment,

our gratitude to the partners that worked with us hand in hand in every single step; 35Films, OHI Leo Burnett and Cannes Studio, we salute you for your efforts and keenness to exploring new avenues and reaching new heights with Omantel.” Kiyumi added.

Effie Worldwide, the parent of MENA Effie, stands for effectiveness in marketing, spotlighting ideas that work and encouraging thoughtful dialogue about the drivers of marketing effectiveness. The awards honor all forms of effective marketing and the companies and individuals creating effective work across the globe.



Abdulnasir al Raisi

leisure, and the beauty and wellness segments.

The Asalah Debit Card offers access to 50 lounges worldwide and has a higher ATM withdrawal limit of RO1,000. Meanwhile, Asalah Visa Signature credit cardholders can enjoy airport lounge access at more than 1,000 lounges worldwide, and a 24/7 global concierge service.

The Asalah Visa Credit Card also offers one per cent cashback on purchases as well as free multi-trip travel insurance for customers and their direct family members. Cardholders can also enjoy complimentary chauffeur service to and from the Muscat International Airport.

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- 1) Letters on an ambulance
- 4) "Anything...?"
- 8) Can't stand
- 13) "Fancy that!"
- 14) Indian flatbread
- 15) Courageous
- 16) "Drop everything!" for short
- 18) Venetian VIP
- 19) Christmas seasons
- 20) Collection of information
- 22) Catalog
- 23) Under the weather
- 24) Cheek makeup
- 26) Discordant, musically
- 29) Reel's partner
- 30) Opinion piece
- 34) A place to sleep
- 35) More than big
- 36) Cape Canaveral cancellation
- 37) Dresden's river
- 38) Bag on the mound
- 39) "Cogito, _ sum"
- 40) Super server, in tennis
- 41) Turkish honorific (Var.)

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| 42) Mary of "The Maltese Falcon" | 9) Groom, in a way |
| 43) Young, 1960s Brits | 10) Symbol of goodness |
| 44) Amigo | 11) "Your turn" |
| 45) Place in Greece | 12) Balance |
| 46) Russian pancakes | 17) Rembrandt's tool |
| 48) Extinct flightless bird | 21) Dull |
| 49) Intensely passionate | 22) Poet W.H. |
| 52) Most energetic | 25) Sayings attributed to Jesus |
| 57) Disrepute and then some | 26) Crosswise, on deck |
| 58) Hindu Mr. | 27) Communications business, shortly |
| 59) Be a monarch | 28) Globular |
| 60) Dentist's direction | 31) _cochere (carriage entrance) |
| 61) Husk relative | 32) Encourage |
| 62) Lobster coral | 33) Opportunities, so to speak |
| 63) Looped crosses | 35) Hulk of wrestling fame |
| 64) Annexes | |
| 65) Have completely | |
| DOWN | |
| 1) "Good grief!" | 38) Like white water? |
| 2) Arizona city | 42) Hovering over |
| 3) Be a good usher | 45) Small glass vials (Var.) |
| 4) Ultimate object | 47) Cocktail garnishes |
| 5) Golden Triangle country | 49) Word in the title of a 1970 war film |
| 6) Reptile of the American West | 50) Balder's dad |
| 7) Hurricane heading, sometimes | 51) Skater's milieu |
| 8) Chasm | 53) Bibliographical abbr. |
| | 54) 100 cents, in some |

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ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

 Have you been itching to build a new bookshelf? Or perhaps something less concrete is calling you to action. Maybe you want to build a new relationship or new knowledge base. Or perhaps you want to develop a talent that you let languish.

Whatever it is, heed this call to action and get going. You'll be glad you took advantage of the moment when you did.

 LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Dreaming about making a change in your life is nice, but unless you actually do it, you're just wasting time and fooling yourself. Imagining how things could be different is a fun way to stay flexible and open-minded, but if all you do is think about change all day long you're never going to make any. Action is required to bring dreams to life, so it's time to roll up your sleeves and get to work. People can help if you let them in on your plans.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

A frustrating person who usually makes you cringe is actually going to make you think today. They have radical views that can be hard to swallow, but there is some brilliance in them, a fact you'll finally start to see more clearly. You might surprise yourself by coming to this person's defense, but you won't be surprising them. Despite the adversarial nature of your relationship, they always knew you would recognize a good idea when you heard it.



01. Which English MP, Chief Secretary to the Admiralty under King Charles II and King James II, kept a detailed private diary during 1660–1669 which contained personal revelations and eyewitness accounts of great events and, after publication in the 19th century, became a primary source for study of the English Restoration period?

- A. William Pitt the Elder
- B. James Boswell
- C. Oscar Wilde
- D. Samuel Pepys



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Today is not the day to back off whatever you're working on just because you encounter a problem. It's the opposite, in fact. Today is one of those days when the more you push through obstacles, the more powerful you and your project become. By the time you've finished with this, people will really be able to see what you're made of. And what you're made of is some mighty impressive determination!



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Sometimes our greatest strengths can be our greatest weaknesses too. How? Well, if you rely on your strengths to get you through life's difficulties and they're strong enough to do the job, in the long run this can lead you to neglect your weaknesses, which can grow weaker and weaker with time.

If you think you're doing this, take a step back. Instead of judging your weaknesses, get to know them.

 CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Are you a teacher? Before you answer, think about it. Have you ever helped somebody understand something they couldn't grasp until you sat down with them and went over the steps of the whole thing? Have you ever explained a physics problem or an emotional problem or how to color between the lines? Sounds like you've got a teacher in you whether it's your official job or not. Who are you teaching?



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

You're good at telling people what they want to hear, not in a pandering kind of way, of course, but in a thoughtful, considerate way. You reflect what they say back to them, and they feel like you care about what they're saying and then go deeper. This is a wonderful conversational talent. Today, though, why not work on telling people what you want them to hear. That's a different kind of talent, one that could involve learning to assert yourself a little more.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

This is going to feel like a long, slow day, but it's also a day that offers you plenty of time to experiment with new ways of reorganizing your stuff. Doing things in a different way might put off the people who think they know you inside and out, but don't let that stop you.

When you're trying to figure out who you are, you can't be held back by other people think you are. You have to forge your own way in life, so why not start now?



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

You could encounter a problem at work that isn't in your power to solve. This is, naturally, quite annoying, but you have to be realistic. If the matter is out of your hands, the matter is out of your hands. Instead of getting unduly upset about it, focus on what you can change or on what is working.

You'll feel better, and the powers that be will eventually deal with the problem.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

It's been difficult to muster up support for the way someone has radically changed. Their life is different, but it doesn't look like much an improvement from where you're sitting. If you don't believe they're moving in the right direction, or you're having trouble accepting who they've become, you should address it today. Decide once and for all you're going to give some unsolicited advice or just going to let them keep going down this path.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Communication will be fun but a little complicated today. A culture clash could occur when you're trying to talk to someone from a very different background. The two of you might waste a lot of time talking past each other instead of listening to each other. Don't miss out on the chance to stir up some inspiring and energizing ideas that could perk up your creativity and get you motivated to make a change in your life. This person is someone you should work to understand.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

If there's anything you're good at it's meeting people, shaking their hands, looking them in the eye, and letting them know that if they want to talk, they can talk to you. In personal terms, this is called connecting. In professional terms, it's called networking. You're good at both, and it's because you really put yourself out there. And you put yourself out there because you like to. You can make some valuable connections today.

Answers: 1. D 2. C 3. B

A black and white line drawing of a school bus, designed as a coloring page. The bus is anthropomorphic, with a large, friendly smile on its front grille, two large, expressive eyes with long eyelashes on the windshield, and a small mouth on the front bumper. The bus has a classic design with a rounded front, a large windshield, and a series of windows along its side. It is shown from a front-three-quarter view, facing slightly to the left. The drawing is simple and clean, with thick black outlines and no shading, making it ideal for coloring.

L	T	E	P
D	R	I	I
L	N	A	A
E	S	G	I

Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters. A three letter word is worth one point, a four letter word is worth two points, and so on. Valid words must be at least three letters long.

Solution 20-25 words:
Excellent, 15-20 words: Very good, 10-15 words: Good, 5-10 words: Average

LEVEL EASY: Fill in the grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9 and only one instance of each number

2	1		8	9	5			
	3	8		2	7			
		9		6	3			8
						6	9	7
				1				
4	6	3						
3			6	7		2		
			5	3		8	4	
			9	4	2		5	3

You have three minutes to find all the words contained in this word.

Rules: Words should be at least four letters long, proper nouns and duplicates don't count

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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7	4
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Ukraine works to restore power after Russian missiles batter grid

Kyiv, Ukraine - Ukraine worked on Saturday to restore electricity and water supplies after Russia's latest wave of attacks pitched multiple cities into darkness and forced people to endure sub-zero temperatures without heating or running water.

The volley of missiles unleashed on Friday came as President Vladimir Putin held extensive meetings with the military top brass overseeing Russia's invasion of Ukraine, where Moscow has stepped up bombardments. In the capital Kyiv, the metro had stopped running so that people wrapped in winter coats could take shelter at underground stations after air raid sirens rang out on Friday morning.

Kyiv mayor Vitali Klitschko said the metro service was re-launched early on Saturday and water supply had been restored. However, a third of Kyiv residents were still without power, Klitschko added.

Power was also restored throughout the eastern city of Kharkiv on Saturday, regional governor Oleg Sinegubov said, after the strikes left Ukraine's second city without electricity.

Ukraine's national energy provider imposed emergency blackouts, saying on Saturday that the energy system 'continues to recover'.

Ukrenergo had warned the extent of the damage in the



People walk near the Maidan square as snow falls in the city of Kyiv on Saturday (AFP)

The volley of missiles unleashed on Friday came as President Vladimir Putin held extensive meetings with the military top brass

north, south and centre of the country meant it could take longer to restore supplies than after previous attacks.

During a visit to the army staff on Friday, Putin sought out proposals from his military commanders on how Russia should proceed with the Ukraine offensive, according to the Kremlin.

The Kremlin released footage of Putin presiding over a round-table meeting with Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov among other top brass.

tober has pursued an aerial onslaught against what Moscow says are military-linked facilities.

But France and the European Union have said the suffering inflicted on freezing civilians constitutes war crimes, with the bloc's foreign policy chief calling the bombings 'barbaric'.

Russia fired 74 missiles - mainly cruise missiles - on Friday, 60 of which were shot down by anti-aircraft defences, according to the Ukrainian army.

Kyiv withstood one of the biggest missile attacks since the

start of the invasion. Regional officials said their air defence forces had shot down 37 out of 40 missiles.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said the strikes left hit power and water supplies in Kyiv and 14 regions.

In the central city of Kryvyi Rih, where Zelensky was born, the air strikes hit a residential building.

A 64-year-old woman and a young couple with a little son died, governor Valentyn Reznichenko said on Saturday,

adding that 13 others had been wounded.

In the south, fresh Russian shelling in Kherson, recently recaptured by Ukraine, killed a 36-year-old man and injured a 70-year-old woman, governor Yaroslav Yanushevich said.

Kherson has been subjected to persistent Russian shelling since Moscow's forces retreated in November, and power was cut in the city earlier this week.

Moscow has said the strikes on Ukrainian infrastructure are a response to an explosion on the Kerch bridge connecting the Russian mainland to the Crimean peninsula, annexed from Ukraine in 2014.

Ukrainian defence officials said this week that their forces had downed over a dozen Iranian-made attack drones launched at Kyiv, a sign that Western-supplied systems are having an impact. Ukrainian military leaders have warned Moscow is preparing for a major winter offensive, including a fresh attempt to take Kyiv.

Aiming to push Moscow to the negotiating table, the EU on Friday imposed further sanctions, adding restrictions on the export of drone engines to Russia or countries like Iran looking to supply Moscow with weapons.

NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg told AFP that Russia was readying for a protracted war.

AFP

DR Congo: Flooding kills more than 160

Kinshasa, DR Congo - More than 160 people have died in the worst floods to batter DR Congo's capital Kinshasa in years, UN officials estimated on Friday, citing authorities.

After an all-night downpour on Tuesday, major roads in the centre of Kinshasa, a city of about 15mn people, were submerged for hours and a key supply route leading to the port of Matadi collapsed.

"As of 16 December, the Congolese authorities reported that at least 169 people have died; around 30 were injured and receiving treatment in hospitals across the city and at least 280 houses were destroyed," the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said. The government has not announced an increased toll since the prime minister's office provisionally put the figure at 120 dead on Tuesday.

The Mont-Ngafula and Ngaliema districts in the capital's west were hardest hit by the torrential rains, according to OCHA, with about 38,000 people affected. A three-day national mourning period began on Wednesday.

AFP

Ten die in apartment block fire in Lyon, France

Lyon, France - Ten people, five of them children, died in a pre-dawn blaze on Friday in a run-down apartment block in a deprived suburb of Lyon, the French government said.

The blaze in Vaulx-en-Velin broke out at around 3am (0200 GMT) in a building known as a drug dealing spot, said Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin.

"All the flats were destroyed by fire... It's pretty shocking," 22-year-old Yasmine told AFP. "There were no fire doors, no fire extinguisher."

The student, who declined to give her last name, said one of the building's doors had been 'blocked by police, which undermined everyone's safety'.

Other eyewitnesses also reported the door being blocked.

Lyon police have launched an inquiry into the cause, including possible arson.

Darmanin said it was too early to determine how the fire started but hailed the work of firefighters, who arrived on the scene 12 minutes after being alerted.

They 'were able to save 15 people' by taking considerable risks for their own lives by climbing the building from the outside because they couldn't get inside and saving children and babies up to the seventh floor', he said.

"Without the rapidity of the fire services and their heroism, the toll would have been much worse." Twenty four people were injured, including four 'whose lives are still in danger', Darmanin said. Some of the bodies of the deceased were still being identified, he added.



Firefighters at work in a building where a fire caused many victims in Vaulx-en-Velin on Friday (AFP)

the building screaming for help as smoke billowed from the windows. Several described children being dropped to crowds at the foot of the building, while one woman was said to have died after jumping from an upper floor to escape.

"I heard people shouting 'help, help, help, help us,'" said Assed Belal, a young resident of the neighbourhood.

"There were people on the ground, others stuck on the balconies and the firefighters had difficulty in intervening because of the trees," he told AFP.

He said his friends had told him they managed to catch a 10-year-old boy who was dropped to safety by his mother.

"After, she jumped but then she died from her injuries," he added.

"My cousin got trapped and she's still missing. We're waiting for the police and the fire service to tell us if she's on the list of people confirmed dead," Murat Kara told AFP.

Darmanin said residents had complained about drug dealing and squatters in the building, which was described as 'run-down' by Lyon city authorities.

AFP

Children dropped from windows

The fire broke out on the ground floor and needed 180 firefighters and 70 fire engines to bring it under control, the authorities said.

Witnesses at the scene described panicked occupants of

Philippine communist leader dies at 83

Manila, Philippines - Jose Maria Sison, who launched one of the world's longest-running Maoist insurgencies, has died at 83, the Communist Party of the Philippines announced on Saturday.

The former university professor died in the Netherlands, where he had lived in self-imposed exile since the collapse of peace talks in 1987, when the rebellion that has claimed tens of thousands of lives was at its peak.

"Sison... passed away at around 8:40p.m. (Philippine time) after two weeks' confinement in a hospital in Utrecht," the party said in a statement, without specifying the cause of death.

"The Filipino proletariat and toiling people grieve the death of

their teacher and guiding light."

The Philippines' defence ministry said his death could finally lead to an end of violence in the country, calling Sison the 'greatest stumbling block' to peace.

'The death of Sison is but a symbol of the crumbling hierarchy' of the communist movement, it said, calling for remaining rebels to surrender.

"A new era without Sison dawns for the Philippines... Let us now give peace a chance."

Sison had hoped to overthrow the government and establish a Maoist regime that would end 'US imperialism' in the former American colony.

The US State Department designated the communist party



Jose Maria Sison (AFP)

and its armed wing foreign terrorist organisations in 2002.

Failed talks

The ongoing armed struggle, launched in 1969, grew out of the global communist movement, finding fertile soil in the Philip-

pines' stark rich-poor divide.

Recruitment for the rebellion also benefited from Ferdinand Marcos's 1972-1986 dictatorship, when the legislature was shuttered, the free press muzzled and thousands of opponents tortured or killed. At its peak in the 1980s, the group boasted about 26,000 fighters, a number the military says has now dwindled to a few thousand.

Since 1986, successive Philippine administrations have held peace talks with the communists through their Netherlands-based political arm, the NDF.

The 2016 election of former president Rodrigo Duterte - a self-declared socialist and a former student of Sison - brought a

burst of optimism for peace talks.

But the talks later devolved into threats and recrimination, with Duterte officially cutting them off in 2017, declaring the group a terrorist organisation and accusing them of killing police and soldiers while negotiations were under way. In recent years, the government has claimed that hundreds of communist rebels have surrendered in exchange for financial assistance and livelihood opportunities.

Deadly clashes still take place in different parts of the country, which is also plagued by kidnapping-for-ransom groups and Islamist secessionist movements in the southern region.

AFP

Musk to restore Twitter accounts of journalists

San Francisco, US - Elon Musk said late on Friday he would reinstate the Twitter accounts of several journalists who were suspended after he accused them of endangering his family.

Musk had drawn anger and warnings from the EU and UN after suspending the accounts of more than half a dozen prominent journalists from the *New York Times*, CNN and the *Washington Post*.

"The people have spoken. Accounts who doxxed my location will have their suspension lifted now," the Twitter owner tweeted.

Musk carried out a Twitter poll asking whether he should restore the suspended accounts now or in a week's time. Nearly 59 per cent of the 3.69mn who took part said he should restore the accounts now.

Some of the suspended accounts appeared to have been reactivated, with former Vox journalist Aaron Rupar tweeting again.

"I was pretty bummed about getting suspended initially but quickly realised it'd be fine be-



A phone screen displays a photo of Elon Musk with the Twitter logo shown in the background (AFP)

cause I'm blessed to have an amazing online community," Rupar tweeted, thanking people for their support.

The latest controversy began when Musk on Wednesday suspended @elonjet, an account that tracked flights of his private plane.

Musk said the move was necessary after a car in Los Angeles carrying one of his children was followed by 'a crazy stalker' and seemed to blame the tracking of his jet for the incident.

Some of the journalists had reported on the affair, including tweets linking to the suspended @elonjet account, which Musk said amounted to offering 'assassination coordinates' against him and his family. In a chat hosted live on Twitter, Musk had provided no evidence for his claim but told some of the suspended reporters that on Twitter 'everyone's going to be treated the same... they're not special because you're a journalist.'

Pressed further on his allega-

tions, Musk ended the conversation. Twitter Spaces, the feature where the chat took place, was then suspended.

Musk's move to suspend the journalists' accounts had drawn sharp criticism from media organisations, the European Union and UN. "News about arbitrary suspension of journalists on Twitter is worrying," EU commissioner Vera Jourova posted on Twitter, warning the influential platform could face hefty fines through European laws.

"Elon Musk should be aware of that. There are red lines. And sanctions, soon," she added.

The spokesman for UN chief Antonio Guterres called it a 'dangerous precedent at a time when journalists all over the world are facing censorship, physical threats and even worse'.

Controversies

Twitter has lurched from one controversy to the next since Musk took control after paying US\$44bn, mainly by selling shares in Tesla, his successful electric car company.

The billionaire's talk of unfettered speech has scared off major advertisers and caught the attention of regulators.

Musk has reinstated the account of former US president Donald Trump and lashed out against the outgoing key advisor for the US response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Anthony Fauci, a frequent target of vitriol in right-wing media.

CNN has reported that Twitter's former head of trust and safety fled his home after baseless attacks on Twitter content moderation, endorsed by Musk.

Meanwhile, a purge initiated by Musk at Twitter left more than half of its 7,500 employees out of work, and now many of them are taking the SpaceX and Tesla tycoon to court.

Musk at one point signaled he was going to war with Apple over the App Store, only to later tweet that it was a 'misunderstanding.'

Market tracker Insider Intelligence forecast that Twitter would experience an exodus of users.

AFP

Tunisians vote for parliament in poll shunned by opposition

Parliament will have no power, marking the culmination of power grab by Kais Saied

Tunis, Tunisia - Uninspired Tunisians voted on Saturday for a parliament which will have virtually no power, marking the culmination of a power grab by President Kais Saied in the birthplace of the Arab Spring.

Opposition political groups in the North African country are boycotting the election. They say the poll is part of a 'coup' against the only democracy to have emerged from the 2011 wave of uprisings across the region.

The ballot follows three weeks of barely noticeable campaigning, with few posters in the streets and no serious debate among a public preoccupied with day-to-day economic survival.

Last year, after months of political deadlock and economic crisis exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, Saied suspended parliament and sent military vehicles to surround it.

His assumption of executive power came more than a decade after a popular revolution unseated dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

The spark for that revolt came exactly 12 years before this election - on December 17, 2010 - when Mohamed Bouazizi burned himself to death to protest police harassment and unemployment.

Saied, a former law professor,



A Tunisian voter shows her ink-stained finger after voting in the parliamentary election, at a polling station in Mnihla district outside Tunis on Saturday (AFP)

Those who are elected today should remember that they are being watched by their voters, and that if they are not up to the job their mandate will be taken away

KAIS SAIED

has pushed through a new constitution giving the presidency almost unrestrained powers and laying the ground for a 161-seat rubber-stamp legislature in the country of around 12mn people.

On Saturday, he told voters that the country was 'breaking with those who destroyed the country'.

"Those who are elected today should remember that they are being watched by their voters, and that if they're not up to the job their mandate will be taken away," he said in front of a polling station in a comfortable district

of Tunis.

The head of the electoral board, Farouk Bouasker, told state television that more than 270,000 people had cast votes by 10am. He called it 'a significant number'.

But Nouredine Jouini, the head of a central Tunis polling station, sounded a different note.

"We knew that it wouldn't be the normal turnout, but it's even less than we predicted," he said.

Boycotting 'farce'

In the streets of Tunis, many expressed indifference about the

vote.

"I'm not taking part in this farce," said Ridha, a 59-year-old engineer who declined to give his full name.

"This president has disappointed us and he's dragging us towards the abyss."

Saied's moves against an unpopular political system were initially supported by many Tunisians tired of the messy and corrupt democratic system in the post-Ben Ali era.

But almost a year and half on, the country's economic woes have gone from bad to worse. Inflation is around 10 per cent. Frequent shortages of milk, sugar and petrol are fuelling a growing wave of emigration.

The previous legislature had far-reaching powers in the mixed presidential-parliamentary system enshrined in Tunisia's post-revolution constitution.

But the new chamber 'won't be able to appoint a government or censure it, except under draconian conditions that are almost impossible to meet', said political scientist Hamadi Redissi.

Candidates in Saturday's poll are standing as individuals, in a system that neuters political parties including Saied's nemesis, the once-powerful Islamist-leaning Ennahdha party.

Another analyst, Hamza Meddeb, told AFP the election was a 'non-event' and predicted that few Tunisians would vote for largely unknown candidates.

"This election is a formality to complete the political system imposed by Kais Saied and concentrate power in his hands," said Meddeb, a fellow at the Carnegie Middle East Center.

It 'will change nothing'

Almost all of Tunisia's political parties, including Ennahdha, said they would boycott the vote.

The powerful UGTT trade union federation has called the poll meaningless. Student Salima Bahri, 21, said she wasn't voting because it 'will change nothing'.

"All the candidates represent Kais Saied, not the Tunisian people," she said.

But others were determined to take part.

"It's a duty to vote, whatever the process is," said lawyer Ali Bejaoui, 48, after casting his ballot.

The vote comes with Tunisia in the final stages of negotiating a nearly US\$2bn bailout package from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to rescue its crisis-hit public finances.

AFP



Jordanian security forces deploy their armoured vehicles in the southern city of Maan, on Friday (AFP)

Jordan: 44 people arrested after deadly protests

Amman, Jordan - Jordan has arrested dozens of people accused of involvement in protests against rising fuel prices in which a senior police officer was gunned down, the country's security agency said on Saturday.

Colonel Abdul Razzaq Dalabeh, the deputy police chief of Maan province, died of a gunshot to the head in the town of Al-Husseiniya on Thursday while confronting what the authorities called 'riots'.

"Forty-four people who participated in the riots in a number of regions in the kingdom have been arrested and they will be brought before the courts," the Public Security Directorate said in a statement.

It said reinforcements had been sent to the provinces, and accused 'vandals and outlaws' of being behind violence in Maan, in the country's south.

Jordan's King Abdullah II warned on Friday that 'anyone who raises a weapon against the state will be dealt with firmly'.

Interior Minister Mazen al-Faraya, also on Friday, said 'the security services are working to arrest the perpetrator and bring him to justice as soon as possible'. Two other policemen were shot and wounded, also in Al-Husseiniya, the security directorate said.

Cab and truck drivers in several provinces of southern Jordan began strike actions more than a week ago.

They were joined by bus drivers, and merchants who closed their shops on Wednesday to protest higher fuel costs.

Protests broke out this week when demonstrators blocked roads with burning tyres and confronted security forces in some areas.

Fuel prices have nearly doubled in Jordan compared with a year earlier, particularly the diesel used by trucks and buses, and kerosene for heating.

The government has proposed relief measures including financial aid for the most-affected families.

AFP

Malaysia landslide: 24 dead including 7 children

Batang Kali, Malaysia - Rescue workers scoured muddy terrain for survivors and bodies on Saturday as the death toll from a landslide at a Malaysian campsite rose to 24, including seven children, authorities said.

Nine people were still missing after a predawn landslide hit the site located at an organic farm near the town of Batang Kali just outside the capital Kuala Lumpur on Friday.

Selangor state fire and rescue director Norazam Khamis said the chances of finding survivors in the mud and debris a day after the disaster were 'slim'.

Officials said there had been



Rescue workers walk with sniffer dogs at the site of a deadly landslide as they search for survivors in Batang Kali, Selangor on Saturday (AFP)

more than 90 people, most of them asleep, at the campsite near a mountain casino resort

when the landslide struck.

Authorities said 61 people had been found safe or rescued.

Two of the victims were 'believed to be a mother and her child in a state of embrace buried under the earth', Norazam told reporters on Friday.

The farm did not have a licence to run a campsite and its operators would be punished if they were found to have broken the law, authorities said.

Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim visited the area late on Friday and said financial aid would be given to the families of those killed or injured in the disaster.

Selangor state chief minister Amirudin Shari tweeted that all picnic and camping sites in the

state would be closed for a week.

Landslides are common in Malaysia after heavy rains, which are regular at the end of the year.

However, no heavy rains were recorded in the area on the night of the disaster. The government has imposed strict rules on hillside development.

In March, four people were killed after a massive landslide triggered by heavy rains buried their homes in a Kuala Lumpur suburb. In one of the deadliest such incidents, a huge mudslide in 1993 brought on by heavy rain caused a 12-storey residential building outside the capital to collapse, killing 48 people.

Belgian ice disrupts international trains

Brussels, Belgium - Pre-Christmas rail passengers travelling on routes connecting Belgium to France, the Netherlands, Germany and Britain faced disruption and long delays on Saturday because of ice on power lines.

Infrabel, which manages Belgian rail infrastructure, told AFP that two trains - an international Thalys service and a French TGV - had been halted mid-route. These services were restarted two hours later, as huge crowds built up on platforms at Brussels' Midi Station, but passengers were warned of knock-on delays throughout the day.

In addition to the Thalys route, which connects Amsterdam, Brussels and Paris, the Eurostar service from the Belgian capital to London also faced disruption and at least one cancellation.

"Traffic has restarted, but there will be multiple delays throughout the day on international services," an Infrabel spokesperson said. Two Thalys services from Amsterdam to Paris via Brussels have been cancelled, the rail company said. There will also be long delays on some services to the German town of Düsseldorf and to Schiphol airport.

AFP

S Africa's Ramaphosa seeks re-election as ruling party boss

Johannesburg, South Africa - South Africa's ruling ANC was due to elect a new leader this weekend after the country's embattled president Cyril Ramaphosa pitched to steer the graft-tainted party for a second term.

Despite a tarnishing cash-heist scandal and vociferous internal opposition, Ramaphosa, 70, is tipped to win re-election as the head of the African National Congress (ANC).

But after 28 years in power, the party shaped by Nelson Mandela into the main weapon that ended apartheid faces deep rifts and declining support.

Its image has been stained by corruption, cronyism, nepotism and a lacklustre economic record.

In a three-hour-long address on Friday at a key ANC confer-



Cyril Ramaphosa gives a speech to launch the 55th National Conference of the ANC in Johannesburg on Friday (AFP)

ence, Ramaphosa sought to project confidence and authority.

"The people of South Africa ... expect us to have the courage and the honesty to recognise our shortcomings and the resolve to correct them," Ramaphosa told some 4,500 ANC delegates at an

events centre near Johannesburg.

Almost three decades after the end of white-minority rule, unemployment and crime rates are sky high, poverty and inequality remain widespread, and power cuts have hit record levels amid a worsening energy crisis.

Dozens of delegates - largely supporters of corruption-tainted former president Jacob Zuma who was forced out by Ramaphosa - heckled Ramaphosa, chanting 'Change! Change!' and banging on their

still expected to take place on Saturday.

Bitter rivalry

Portraying himself as a graft-busting champion, Ramaphosa took control of the ANC in 2017

Despite a tarnishing cash-heist scandal and vociferous internal opposition, Ramaphosa, 70, is tipped to win re-election as the head of the African National Congress

tables.

"Let us exercise discipline, let us exercise political consciousness," Ramaphosa said, urging attendees to debate issues instead of 'shouting' and 'howling at each other'.

The conference started several hours late on Friday but party officials said voting was

after his then boss Zuma became mired in corruption.

But his clean-hands image has been dented by allegations he concealed a huge cash burglary at his farm rather than report the matter to the authorities.

Ramaphosa won a reprieve ahead of the conference when

the ANC used its majority in parliament to block a possible impeachment inquiry.

He is still leading the list of only two nominated presidential candidates so far and is seen to be the most viable in the absence of better options in the 110-year-old party.

"The president's term came with a lot of challenges like COVID-19 and he has really tried to pull through," said ANC delegate Mike Mtsweni, 28. "He is going to come back ... as the (party) president."

Ramaphosa's rival is his former health minister Zweli Mkhize, who is facing corruption allegations linked to COVID-19 funds.

An ex-trade unionist, Cyril Ramaphosa fronted the historic negotiations to end apartheid in 1994 and helped draft the constitution, which is hailed as one

of Africa's most progressive charters.

On Friday, he was captured on camera laughing and shaking hands with Zuma, who is leading internal opposition to his rule.

On the eve of the conference, Zuma announced he was seeking to sue Ramaphosa over a leaked medical report linked to a 1990s arms corruption trial involving him.

But the action is unlikely to hamper Ramaphosa's chances of securing a second term as ANC chief.

The party has lost its grip over key cities in municipal elections and its electoral showing slumped last year to under 50 per cent for the first time in its history.

But it remains South Africa's largest party.

AFP

INDIA

Bilkis Bano case: SC dismisses review plea against remission

New Delhi, India - The Supreme Court has dismissed the plea of Bilkis Bano seeking a review of its earlier order by which it had asked the Gujarat government to consider the plea for the remission of 11 convicts in a gangrape case under 1992 policy.

A bench of judges headed by Justice Ajay Rastogi dismissed the review plea of Bano who had challenged the apex court's May judgement which had held that remission of the convicts should be considered as per the policy existing at the time of conviction. "I am directed to inform you that the review petition above mentioned filed in Supreme Court was dismissed by the court on December 13, 2022," read a communication sent to Bano's counsel Shobha Gupta by the Supreme Court's assistant registrar.

As per procedures, review pleas against top court judgments are decided in chambers by circulation by the judges who were part of the judgement under review.

She has filed a review plea against the May order of the Supreme Court which allowed



This file photo shows Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) supporters staging a demonstration against the remission of sentence granted to 11 convicts in Bilkis Bano case, in Patna on September 3 this year (ANI)

the Gujarat government to apply the 1992 remission Rules which were in place in the State where the crime was actually committed. The trial of the case took place in Maharashtra.

Bano, besides filing a review petition, also filed a plea challenging the premature release of 11 convicts, who had gang-raped

her and murdered her family members during the 2002 Godhra riots.

Bilkis said that even being the victim of the crime, she had no clue about any such process of remission or premature release initiated.

Gujarat's remission order is a mechanical order of remission

by completely ignoring the law's requirements as consistently laid down, the plea said.

Earlier, some PILs were filed seeking directions to revoke the remission granted to 11 convicts.

The pleas were filed by the National Federation of Indian Women, whose General Secretary is Annie Raja, Member of

the Communist Party of India (Marxist) Subhashini Ali, journalist Revati Laul, social activist and professor Roop Rekha Verma and TMC MP Mahua Moitra.

In its affidavit, the Gujarat government defended remission granted to convicts, saying they completed 14 years of sentence in prison and their behaviour was found to be good.

The State government said it has considered the cases of all 11 convicts as per the policy of 1992 and remission was granted on August 10, 2022, and the Central government government also approved the ore-mature release of convicts.

It is pertinent to note that the remission was not granted under the circular governing grant of remission to prisoners as part of the celebration of 'Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav', it has said. The affidavit stated: "State government considered all the opinions and decided to release 11 prisoners since they have completed 14 years and above in prisons and their behaviour was found to be good."

ANI



Defence Minister Rajnath Singh addresses at the 95th FICCI annual convention at Taj Palace, in New Delhi on Saturday (ANI)

India as superpower will work for global welfare: Rajnath

New Delhi, India - Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Saturday said India aspires to be superpower and work for the welfare of the entire world and emphasised that 'we will never have the intention to capture even one inch of land of any other country'.

Addressing the FICCI Annual Convention and AGM in the national capital, the union minister said: "We want to be a superpower to work for the welfare of the world. Prime Minister (Narendra Modi) during his address from Red Fort talked about five pledges to the country, which are essential to make India super power and it shouldn't be considered that we want

to dominate any country or we have the intention to capture even one inch of land of any other country," Singh said.

Speaking on the recent India-China border clash, the Defence Minister said: "Whether it is Galwan or Tawang, our defence forces have proved their bravery and valour."

"In 1949, China's GDP was lower than that of India. Until 1980, India was not even in the list of top 10 economies... In 2014, India was on the 9th position in world economies. Today India is close to a US\$3.5tn economy and 5th largest in the world," Rajnath Singh said.

ANI

PM Narendra Modi to visit Meghalaya, Tripura today

New Delhi, India - Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit Meghalaya and Tripura on Sunday and inaugurate, dedicate and lay the foundation stone of projects worth over Rs 6,800 crore.

In Shillong, Modi will participate in the golden jubilee celebration of the North Eastern Council (NEC). He will dedicate and lay the

foundation stone of multiple projects before travelling to Agartala to inaugurate and lay the foundation stone of various key projects, the statement by PMO read.

Modi will dedicate to the nation 4G mobile towers, of which more than 320 have been completed and around 890 are under construction.

ANI

Toxic alcohol kills at least 37 in 'dry' state of Bihar

Chapra, India - Toxic hooch has killed at least 37 people in the eastern Indian state of Bihar where alcohol is banned, officials said on Saturday, with unconfirmed reports putting the death toll at over 70.

Selling and consuming liquor is banned in several parts of India, driving a thriving black market for potent and sometimes lethal backstreet moonshine that kills hundreds every year. Families of the victims in the latest tragedy said that people from several villages drank a

locally made tippie known as 'Mahua' or 'Desi Daru' on Monday at a wedding and other events.

Many then complained of stomach pain and vision loss and started vomiting. By Thursday more 20 people were dead and on Saturday around a dozen were in hospital in a critical condition. "More than two dozen people have lost lives in the last 48 hours," a police official told AFP, saying that 37 people had died so far.

He was unable to confirm



Lok Janshakti Party chief Chirag Paswan meets the family members of the victims of the Chapra Hooch tragedy, in Saran on Saturday (ANI)

some local media reports that 71 people had died.

Police have detained more than 100 people in connection with illegal manufacturing and selling liquor in the last three days, while 600 litres of hooch have been seized.

Local authorities have been trumpeting their use of drones, helicopters and motorboats to crack down on the black market, but the most recent incident is just the latest in a string of similar deadly cases.

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HUMAN EVOLUTION

Flame and fossils



Earliest proof of cooking shows our ancestors liked well-done fish – fossils reveal teeth of fish but missing bones which disintergrate at high temperatures



Early human ancestors living 780,000 years ago liked their fish well-done, Israeli researchers revealed Monday, in what they said was the earliest evidence of fire being used to cook.

Exactly when our ancestors started cooking has been a matter of controversy among archaeologists because it is difficult to prove that an ancient fireplace was used to prepare food, and not just for warmth.

The birth of the culinary arts, however, marks an important turning point in human history, because by making food easier to chew and digest it is believed to have greatly contributed to our eventual expansion across the world.

Previously, the first definitive evidence of cooking was by Neanderthals and early Homo sapiens 170,000 years ago, according to a new study published in the journal Nature Ecology and Evolution.

The study, which pushes that date back by more than 600,000 years, is the result of 16 years of work by its first author Irit Zohar, an archaeologist at Tel Aviv University's Steinhardt Museum of

Natural History. During that time she has catalogued thousands of fish remains found at a site called Gesher Benot Ya'aqov in northern Israel.

The site near the banks of the Jordan River was once home to a lake, where a treasure trove of ancient fish fossils helped the team of researchers investigate exactly when the first cooks started getting inventive in the kitchen.

"It was like facing a puzzle, with more and more information until we could make a story about human evolution," Zohar told AFP.

Desire to cook

The first clue came in an area that contained nearly no fish bones but lots of teeth, she said. This could point towards cooking because fish bones soften and disintegrate at temperatures under 500 degrees Celsius (930 Fahrenheit) but their teeth remain.

In the same area, a colleague of Zohar's found burnt flints and other evidence that it had previously been used as a fireplace. And most of the teeth belonged to just two particularly large species of carp, suggesting they had been selected for their succulent meat, the study said. Some of the carp were over

The researchers used a technique called X-ray powder diffraction at the Natural History Museum in London to find out how heating changes the structure of the crystals which make up enamel

two metres long.

The decisive proof came by studying the teeth's enamel, Zohar said. The researchers used a technique called X-ray powder diffraction at the Natural History Museum in London to find out how heating changes the structure of the crystals which make up enamel.

Comparing the results with other fish fossils, they found that the teeth from the key area of the lake were subjected to a temperature of between 200-500 degrees Celsius (400-930 Fahrenheit). That is just the right range for well-cooked fish.

Whether our forerunners baked, grilled, poached or sauted their fish remains unknown, though the study

suggested they may have used some kind of earth oven.

Fire is thought to have first been mastered by Homo erectus some 1.7 million years ago. But "because you can control fire for warming, that does not mean you control it for cooking - they could have eaten the fish next to the fire," Zohar said.

Then, the human ancestors might have thrown the bones in the fire, said Anais Marrast, an archaeozoologist at France's National Museum of Natural History not involved in the study. "The whole question about exposure to fire is whether it is about getting rid of remains or a desire to cook," she added.

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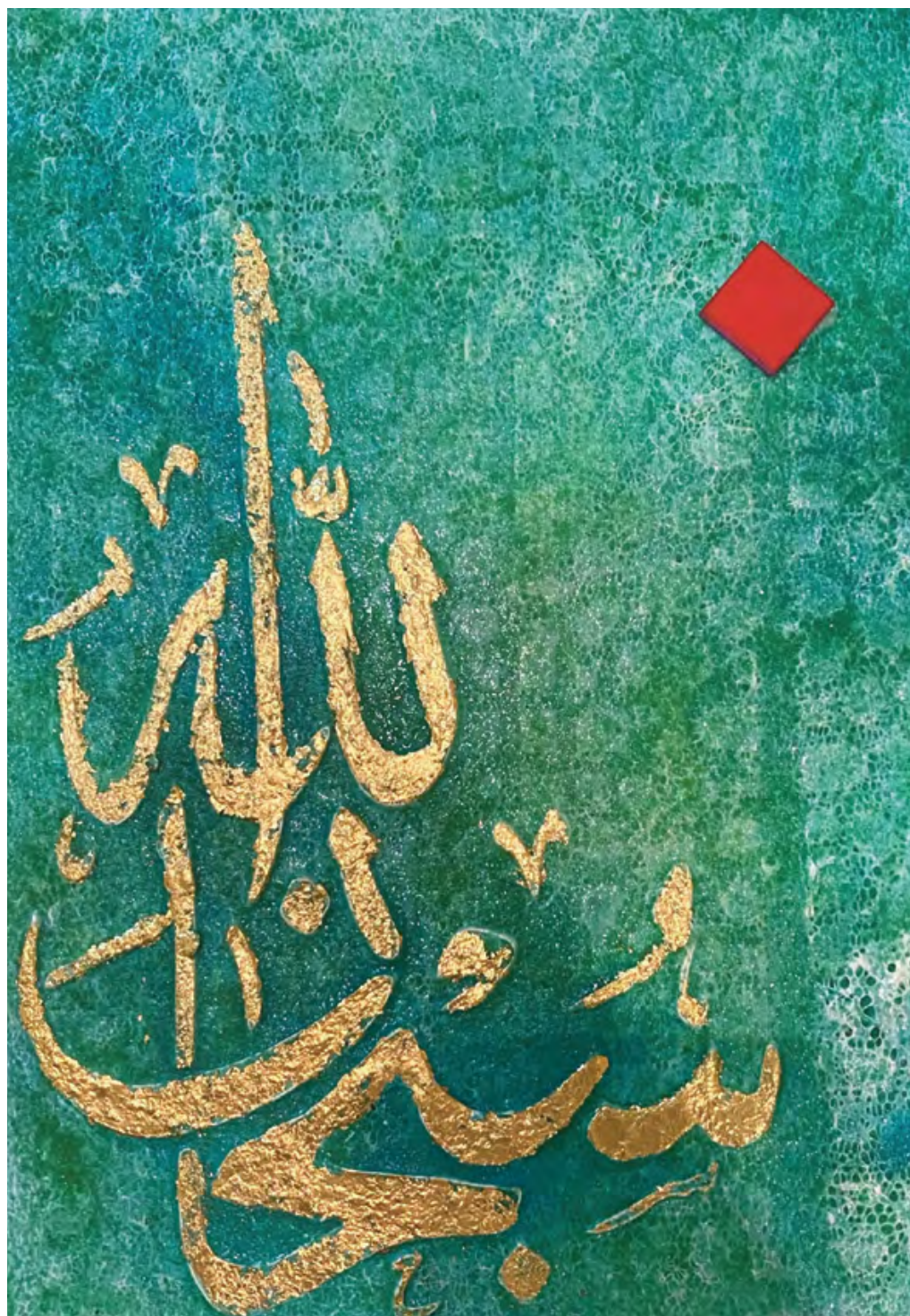
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Sacred scripts

ISLAMIC COLLECTION

Tahira Fida showcased a touch of class in her latest Islamic Collection of artworks, using Quranic verses and phrases, which was exhibited at Bait Muzna over the past month



The entire process was a peaceful experience, and through the creation of this collection, I also came face to face with amazing information on Quranic verses

TAHIRA FIDA



Hubert Vaz

With a clever use of metallic hues, intricate composition of scriptural texts and messages that are timeless, Tahira Fida, one of Oman's most talented and experimental artists who has been juggling with varied genres and applications of art over the years, recently presented her Islamic Collection at Bait Muzna gallery.

Through a well-defined set of 50 artworks, each with their own identity yet conforming to the common theme, Tahira showed how Islamic art can be made part of one's home décor, thereby bringing in a sacred element into living space and warding off negativity. Though the exhibition of her collection concluded last weekend, they are nevertheless available for purchase online.

"My new collection of art is based on Islamic art and the influence of Islamic architecture and ornaments. The idea of this collection was based on my discussion with my late grandmother who cherished a printout of a composition of Quranic verses," said Tahira, explaining that she was curious to know why that printout was installed on the main door of her home and was told that it augured well for all those residing there as well as for those who called on them.

With extra time on hand during the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Tahira says, she reviewed all her pending projects which were kept on hold for lack of time, and took them up, one by one. Calligraphy was a key project and it was the first to take shape, she disclosed.

"I always wanted to do calligraphy, so it became my new project during that period. I started practising using bamboo pens, which I bought from Iran, and tried to produce an original painting which looked like my grandmother's printout as my memory took me back to her house and her belongings," Tahira said.

She soon composed a set of Islamic ornaments with Quranic verses or with inscriptions revering the Almighty, also with popular Arabic words, such as 'Love'. All the paintings have a mounting and a wooden frame to give it a luxurious finish. The artworks are made on wood and acrylic colours, gold leaves, and gold dust was used to give it 3D sheen using mixed media techniques.



How many artworks does the Islamic Collection comprise?

I had 50 canvases, most of them are in size 40cm by 40cm with wooden frames to give them an elegant and well furnished look. However, coffee tables and stands can be created using the same technique, if customised.

Have you learnt calligraphy before?

Yes, I have done 3-4 courses in calligraphy at an institute in Muscat and one with a famous artist and calligrapher who delivered a course at the Omani Association of Art. Besides, I have also spent some time with some famous calligraphers in Mashhad (Iran).

Are there any applications for your creations in this collection?

These creative designs can be printed on clothes or leather. The original artwork can also be used to adorn surfaces of furniture.

Don't these artworks of Quranic verses need to be given a place of honour when installed?

Yes, it has to be installed in a prominent place in good view. People who don't understand Arabic can also buy them as some of them reflect the beauty of Arabic calligraphy with universal concepts and words like 'Ishq' which stands for 'love'. I myself always loved to have Quranic verses in art at home and used to get printouts, like my grandmother. Now, I have original artworks. I believe, these can bring peace and prosperity at home with the name of the Almighty, who is one in all religions.

How fulfilling was the experience of creating this collection?

It was very interesting to create all the pieces of this collection. You will not believe, the entire process was a peaceful experience, and through the creation of this collection, I also came face to face with amazing information on Quranic verses or scriptural texts. Also, I released how beautiful this language (Arabic) is.

Calligraphers say, Arabic calligraphy is a very beautiful and amazing example of art, because in Arabic calligraphy the words are symmetrical and well structured, just like the human body. Therefore, it looks very organic and beautiful.

Do you now believe that your grandmothers' sentiments live on with this collection?

I do believe that my grandmother's blessings are with me whenever I go and whatever I do.





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SMALL CONSOLATION

Gvardiol, Orsic on target as Croatia overcome Morocco's challenge to finish third at World Cup

Doha, Qatar - Croatia defeated Morocco 2-1 in the World Cup third place play-off on Saturday, with Mislav Orsic curling home the winner.

Josko Gvardiol, one of the stars of the tournament in Qatar, headed Croatia into the lead in the seventh minute at the Khalifa International Stadium but Achraf Dari brought Morocco level right away.

Orsic's terrific curling strike late in the first half ensured Croatia took home the bronze medal, the 11th World Cup in a row a European

3 RD PLACE	
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team has finished third.

Morocco, the first World Cup semi-finalists in history, had signalled their intent with a spirited display against 2018 runners-up Croatia in their opening game in Qatar.

The rematch was nothing like the cagey 0-0 draw in the group stage, with Morocco goalkeeper Yassine Bounou dangerously close to passing the ball into his own net early on.

Croatia soon surged in front from a well-rehearsed free-kick as Ivan Perisic nodded Lovro Majer's clip into the box back towards a diving Gvardiol, who planted his header into the corner.

But Morocco hit back two minutes later when Hakim Ziyech's free-kick looped up off the head of Majer, allowing Dari to head past



Croatia players celebrate with their medals after winning the World Cup third-place play-off match against Morocco in Doha on Saturday (AFP)

Dominik Livakovic.

Andrej Kramaric headed straight at Bounou, who then did well to scoop the ball to safety as Marko Livaja closed in after spilling a drive from Luka Modric.

Orsic curled in brilliantly via the

post from the corner of the box to put Croatia back on top before half-time after 18-year-old Morocco debutant Bilal El Khannouss lost the ball deep in his half.

Orsic again went close moments after the restart, his goal-

bound effort brushing Jawad El Yamiq and fizzing narrowly past the post.

Croatia were furious when Gvardiol tumbled inside the area when his foot appeared to be caught by Sofyan Amrabat, but

there was no VAR review.

It could have proved a match-changing moment had Youssef En Nesryri found a way past Livakovic, who spread himself superbly to block the striker from close range.

Mateo Kovacic put wide with

the chance to put the game beyond doubt. Morocco had a late penalty appeal turned down and En Nesryri headed just over but the Atlas Lions could not find a way back after their historic run.

AFP

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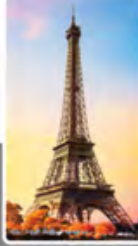
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France's foot soldier Antoine Griezmann pivotal on run to final

Doha, Qatar - That holders France are through to a second consecutive World Cup final is a little down to the goals of Kylian Mbappe, and a lot to the extraordinary performances of Antoine Griezmann.

The 31-year-old's transformation has symbolised more than anything else the man management of France coach Didier Deschamps, who reinvented Griezmann's role partly out of necessity after being hit by a plague of injuries coming into the tournament.

Losing Paul Pogba and N'Golo Kante - France's starting midfield pairing in their triumphant campaign four years ago - before the tournament forced Deschamps to come up with a new solution and so he turned to Griezmann.

Griezmann, the top scorer at Euro 2016 with six goals as hosts France reached the final but lost in extra time to Portugal, is now France's midfield playmaker, a creator of goals but also a tireless

worker.

Karim Benzema, the Ballon d'Or winner, was ruled out after injuring himself in training before a ball was kicked in Qatar.

"He is doing the job of Pogba, Kante and Karim Benzema," former Argentina defender Pablo Zabaleta told AFP.

If the 2016 team was dubbed the "Griezmann Generation", it was the emergence of Kylian Mbappe that helped France take the next step and win the World Cup in 2018.

Over time Griezmann has gradually adapted his game to become more of a support player for France's new superstar, but that has not diminished his impor-



I try to do everything to ensure he (Didier Deschamps) keeps having confidence in me. Every game, every action is me saying thank you to him.

ANTOINE GRIEZMANN

73

Antoine Griezmann has now played 73 consecutive matches for France, beating by a distance the previous national record of 1998 World Cup winner Patrick Vieira, who featured in 44 straight games.

tance. In Qatar he has operated to the right of Aurelien Tchouameni in a midfield trio, with Mbappe, Olivier Giroud and Ousmane Dembele in front of him.

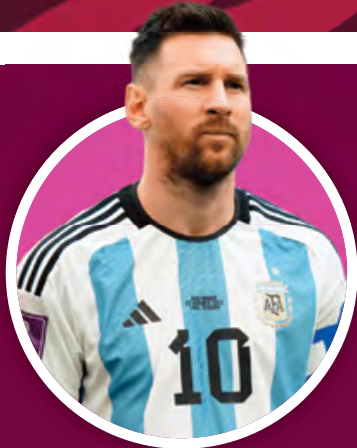
Griezmann had already been outstanding before his performance against England in the quarter-finals, when he robbed possession and committed tactical fouls but also moved the ball around superbly and produced a brilliant assist for Giroud's winner.

Again he came into his own in the semi-final against Morocco, regularly helping break up possession when France were under pressure in the second half.



FIFA WORLD CUP

Qatar2022



'GREATEST' MESSI READY FOR FITTING WORLD CUP FAREWELL

Doha, Qatar - Thirty-seven club trophies, seven Ballon D'Or awards and six European Golden Boots. A Copa America title, an Olympic gold medal and a list of scoring and statistical records that may never be beaten.

Over the course of an 18-year career Lionel Messi has, with one obvious exception, won the lot. And won it again and again.

On Sunday, the 35-year-old Argentina captain has the chance to fill the last remaining hole on his CV: a World Cup winners' medal.

For Messi's most ardent admirers, victory over France at Lusail Stadium will settle the debate over where he ranks in the most exclusive inner sanctum of football's pantheon.

Messi's career achievements to date have already earned him the right to be mentioned in the same breath as Pele, Diego Maradona, Alfredo Di Stefano and Johan Cruyff.

Does a World Cup win on Sunday nudge him ahead of that exalted company? Some think it does. Others think he already stands alone.

"I don't have any doubt saying that: he is the best in history," was the verdict of Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni after Messi's virtuoso display in the 3-0 semi-final win over Croatia.

Former England captain Alan Shearer says he has long regarded Messi's compatriot Maradona as the greatest player of all time on the basis of his 1986 World Cup triumph in Mexico.

"If Messi were to win it here, my view would change," Shearer told the BBC.



Lionel Messi

LAST V

Argentina captain Lionel Messi
against Kylian Mbappe's F

Doha, Qatar - Lionel Messi is hoping to crown his stellar career by leading Argentina to World Cup glory on Sunday but Kylian Mbappe's history-chasing France are standing in his way.

Qatar's World Cup has been tarnished by controversy off the pitch but it concludes with the electrifying prospect of a final between two of global football's powerhouses.

France may need every hour available as kick-off looms after their camp was struck by illness, forcing a number of players to sit out training and giving coach Didier Deschamps an unwanted headache.

Argentina and France are both aiming to win the trophy for the third time, with Les Bleus returning to the final four years after their triumph in Moscow.

Back-to-back titles would be a monumental achievement for the side coached by Deschamps - the only teams to have done it previously are Italy in the 1930s and Pele's Brazil in 1958 and 1962.

Yet that potential achievement is trumped by Messi's quest to win the ultimate prize in the game in what is almost certainly his final World Cup match. The former Barcelona star has won everything going at club level, also claiming the Ballon d'Or seven times, and last year led Argentina to victory in the Copa America.

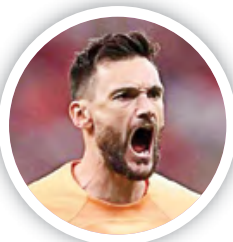
Messi has been brilliant in his fifth World Cup as the team bounced back from a shock opening loss to Saudi Arabia, while his new sidekick, Julian Alvarez, has scored four times.

"It is exciting to be in the final, but



When we w
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EMILIANO MAR



Lots of peop
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HUGO LLORIS,

there is still one step to go," said coach Lionel Scaloni.

Chase for third title

Aged 35 and driven by his desire to make up for defeat by Germany in the 2014 final, Messi has scored five goals and produced some sublime assists.

Sunday's match is likely to be his last chance to match the achievement of Diego Maradona, who inspired Argentina to victory in Mexico in 1986.

"I am really enjoying myself. I have felt happy throughout this World Cup," Messi said after Argentina's 3-0 semi-final win against Croatia.



Julian Alvarez

'SPIDER' MAN ALVAREZ TARGETS STAR BILLING FOR ARGENTINA

Doha, Qatar - Julian Alvarez came to the World Cup as a peripheral figure for Argentina but is preparing for Sunday's final against France as their new star in attack.

The young Manchester City forward started just one of Argentina's World Cup qualifiers and came to Qatar behind Inter Milan forward Lautaro Martinez in the pecking order.

The 22-year-old was unable to make a mark as a substitute as the Copa America champions started their campaign in Doha with a shock 2-1 defeat at the hands of Saudi Arabia.

But in retrospect that could have been his "sliding doors" moment.

Lautaro twice put the ball in the net against the Saudis but both times he was denied by an offside flag.

Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni stuck with Lautaro for the second game - a 2-0 win against Mexico - but Alvarez was in the starting line-up for the decisive match against Poland and has not looked back since. The forward, nicknamed "La Arana" (The Spider), sealed victory with a fine finish into the top corner midway through the second half in the 2-0 win against Poland.

He scored the crucial second goal in the 2-1 victory over Australia in the round of 16 and then caused the Netherlands plenty of problems in the quarter-final.

In the semis, the marauding forward won a penalty that Messi converted and scored twice in a 3-0 win against 2018 finalists Croatia.

Alvarez now has four goals in this

tournament, placing him just one behind joint top scorers Messi and France's Kylian Mbappe.

"I'm happy on a personal level and for the group," Alvarez said after the Croatia win. "We are happy with the way we are playing. We deserve to be in the final. That's what we wanted."

It was a performance that left Scaloni purring.

"At his age it is normal that he wants to conquer the world. He is a boy who will do whatever you say to him," he said.

Alvarez's rise has been meteoric. Premier League champions City snapped up the player on January 31 this year - transfer deadline day and the player's 22nd birthday - for just 17 million euros (\$18 million).

AFP

Our weapons and our strengths will be defined by all our players, and not only by these two players. Messi is doing very well and we hope we win. But this will be a match between Argentina and France - there are many players who can define this match

LIONEL SCALONI
ARGENTINA COACH



MOMENT



CALM BEFORE THE STORM: Boats with flags of France (L) and Argentina sail along

2

World Cup finalists **France** and **Argentina** both have won the title two times. While Argentina were the champions in 1978 and 1986 holders France also won in 1998.

5

Lionel Messi and Kylian Mbappe, whom the fortunes of Argentina and France depend mainly on, lead the scoring charts with five goals each.



SZYMON MARCINIAK TO TAKE CHARGE OF FINAL
Polish referee Szymon Marciniak will take charge of Sunday's final between France and Argentina. Marciniak's assistants will be compatriots Pawel Sokolnicki and Tomasz Listkiewicz..

WALTZ

Messi targets World Cup glory as France in Sunday's final

“We won in Brazil, the title was considered to be ours. And it happens the same way now – people say the favourites are France. But we have the greatest player of all time”

GO MARTINEZ, Argentina goalkeeper

“If people didn't believe in us, but here we are back in the game. We know what Messi represents in the history of our country, but this is a match between France and Argentina. We will do everything to win this last battle”

LOUIS LORIS, France goalkeeper

But will this World Cup be remembered as Messi's tournament, or will France be top dogs once again?

Les Bleus have returned to the final without ever really hitting top form and they now have to contend with illness in their camp. Defenders Raphael Varane and Ibrahima Konate, as well as Kingsley Coman, sat out training on Friday with cold-like symptoms.

Konate replaced Dayot Upamecano in defence for the semi-final against Morocco after he was ruled out by illness, while Adrien Rabiot was also unwell for that game.

The one player they cannot afford

to lose is Mbappe, who scored five goals in the team's first four games but was largely kept quiet in the wins against England and Morocco.

Four years ago Mbappe became the first teenager to score in a World Cup final since Pele when, aged 19, he helped France beat Croatia 4-2.

Yet the iconic image of that tournament was Mbappe consoling Messi after starring as France beat Argentina in the last 16. These days they are club colleagues, jostling for the limelight at Qatar-owned Paris Saint-Germain and now jousting with each other on the greatest stage of all.

France are wary of reducing the match at the 89,000-capacity Lusail Stadium to just a showdown with Messi.

“Yes they have Leo Messi but there will also be 10 other players next to him who have lots of quality,” said midfielder Aurelien Tchouameni. “So we will need to be ready, aware of the opportunity we have to make history.”

Deschamps, who can become the first coach in the post-war era to win two World Cups, said: “We will try to limit his influence as much as possible, just as the Argentines will try to limit the influence of some of my players.”

Antoine Griezmann has been outstanding for France in a new midfield role and might well pip Messi to the Golden Ball if his side emerge victorious.

Argentina welcome back defensive pair Gonzalo Montiel and Marcos Acuna after bans, and forward Angel Di Maria is expected to be fit.

AFF



Kylian Mbappe



MBAPPE SEEKS TO RE-ORDER HIERARCHY IN WORLD CUP FINAL

Doha, Qatar - Kylian Mbappe can on Sunday become the youngest player to win two World Cups since Pele achieved the feat at the age of 21.

Mbappe, who turns 24 two days after the final, is the joint leading scorer with five goals at this World Cup and the face of football's new generation.

The last World Cup for Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, the tournament in Qatar surely marks the passing of the baton from the two players who have dominated the sport for nearly two decades.

While Messi has one final chance to claim an elusive World Cup title, Mbappe and France hope to usher in an era of dominance for a nation appearing in a fourth final in seven attempts.

With a squad decimated by injuries and struggling for form in the run-up, there were genuine concerns France would suffer the same fate they did as holders in 2002 and crash out in the group stage.

France may not have set the world alight en route to the final, but they have been masters of the key moments - demonstrating a ruthlessness and killer instinct when it matters most.

Much of that stems from Mbappe, the most feared player on the planet, whose goals have helped carry France to within one win of becoming the first team to retain the World Cup since Brazil in 1962.

“There is a great connection between the team. We work together but, when you start to come close to the title in this competition you need your main players at their best,” said goalkeeper and captain Hugo Lloris.

AFF

IT IN TIME



A sail along the Corniche seafront in Doha on Thursday



I expect a festive atmosphere with the Argentine people who are passionate and will be right behind their team. They sing a lot and are very expressive. That's good, it's a World Cup final after all, but our opponents are not in the stands.

DIDIER DESCHAMPS
FRANCE COACH



Ousmane Dembele

FRANCE'S DEMBELE SAYS NO ROOM FOR MESSI SENTIMENTS

Doha, Qatar - France star Ousmane Dembele has admitted he will have no room for sentiment for Lionel Messi in Sunday's World Cup final as the holders look to retain the trophy when they face Argentina.

The final represents the last chance for Messi, now 35, to win football's greatest prize - he has already suggested he will not play again at a World Cup.

“With the great career he has had it would be good if he won the World Cup, but we also want to win it,” Dembele, who played alongside Messi for four years at Barcelona, told reporters on Friday. “We are France, we are fighting for our country, for our team, to finish the job after all we have done to get here.

“It is true that this is the trophy he is missing, but we are also here to

make our country proud. I hope France win it.”

The 25-year-old Dembele has been a key player for France in Qatar, starting every game on their run to the final except their defeat by Tunisia in their final group match, when they had already qualified for the knockout stage.

France hit by virus

France coach Didier Deschamps was sweating on the fitness of several key players on Saturday as his team battled a mystery virus on the eve of the World Cup final against Argentina.

With little more than 24 hours to go before the world champions face Lionel Messi and Argentina at Doha's Lusail Stadium on Sunday, France have been left reeling by a

viral outbreak that is believed to have affected five players so far.

Central defenders Raphael Varane and Ibrahima Konate, and winger Kingsley Coman were the latest players to be laid low by the illness, forced to miss a training session on Friday.

That came two days after Adrien Rabiot and Dayot Upamecano were ruled out of Wednesday's semi-final victory over Morocco.

Players, staff and other sources close to the French squad have spoken of a range of symptoms affecting the team in recent days including fever, stomach pain and headaches.

Both Deschamps and France captain Hugo Lloris said Saturday they had no further medical updates as they appeared at a pre-match press conference just after 11:30 am local time.

SCENT OF VICTORY

Debutant Zakir Hasan hits century on debut for Bangladesh but India sniff win in the first Test

Chittagong, Bangladesh - India broke through tough resistance from Bangladesh including a century by Zakir Hasan on his debut to be within four wickets of victory on day four of the first Test on Saturday.

Set a colossal target of 513 runs in Chittagong, Bangladesh reached 272-6 at the close, still needing 241 runs, with skipper Shakib Al Hasan on 40 and Mehidy Hasan on nine.

Earlier, opener Zakir put on a 124-run opening stand together with Najmul Hossain, a record against India, the pair having hung on in the final session of day three and to lunch on day four.

But in the second session, Umesh Yadav got the breakthrough and ended their stand when Najmul edged the ball into the slips.

Virat Kohli initially dropped it at first slip but wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant dived to his left to grab the deflection and Najmul departed for 67.

Axar Patel, who was the pick of India's bowlers on the fourth day with 3-50, soon grabbed India's second wicket bowling Yasir Ali for five.

Kuldeep Yadav removed danger man Liton Das for 19 before Zakir swept Axar for a four to bring up his debut Test hundred.

But Zakir, only the fourth Bangladeshi to achieve the feat, scored no more runs and fell for 100 in the final session when Ravichandran Ashwin made him his only wicket so far in the Test.



Axar Patel was the pick of India's bowlers, taking three wickets for 50 runs on the fourth day of the first Test against Bangladesh in Chittagong on Saturday (AFP)

I only tried to bat as long as possible since we were chasing a big total. I did not want to think 'this is a Test match', a bigger match. I tried to stay as normal as possible

ZAKIR HASAN



Zakir played a defensive shot but could manage only an inside edge, which took a deflection off his pad to Kohli at slip.

"I only tried to bat as long as possible since we were chasing a big total," Zakir said after his 224-ball ton with 13 fours and one six.

"I did not want to think 'this is a Test match', a bigger match. I tried to stay as normal as possible," he said.

Bangladesh collapsed further after his departure as Axar bowled Mushfiqur Rahim for 23 and had Nurul Hasan stumped for three.

"The discussion was clearly after the first session was the kind of be patient, we knew that the wicket would be easy," said India's bowling coach Paras Mhambrey.

India, who have never lost a Test to Bangladesh, put on 404 in the first innings thanks to 90

from Cheteshwar Pujara and 86 by Shreyas Iyer. In reply Bangladesh were all out for 140.

In the second innings Pujara was again India's rock, reaching 102 not out alongside Shubman Gill who made 110, allowing the visitors to declare on 258-2.

AFP

Travis Head puts Australia in charge against South Africa

Brisbane, Australia - An aggressive Travis Head put Australia in charge after the first day of the opening Test against South Africa at the Gabba in Brisbane on Saturday.

After bowling out the visitors for 152 on the stroke of tea, Head came to the crease with the Australian score a precarious 27-3.

But on a wicket that all batters found difficult to score on, Head looked a different class, smashing an unbeaten 78 from just 77 deliveries.

At the close Australia were 145-5 after nightwatchman Scott Boland was dismissed last ball of the day, trailing by just seven runs.

"It was an entertaining day of cricket," Head said.

"It's disappointing to lose the two wickets at the end there but we fought hard.

"It was a difficult wicket, so I think we'll take that - we have to come out and have a good couple of hours in the morn-

ing."

Australian captain Pat Cummins earlier won the toss and chose to bowl on a green wicket under cloudy skies.

The decision was vindicated after a stunning start when South Africa were reduced to 27-4 after 11 overs, a position from which they never recovered. The only batters to defy the Australian attack were wicketkeeper Kyle Verreynne, top scorer with 64, and number four Temba Bavuma, who rescued the visitors from complete annihilation.

But once Bavuma fell for 38 midway through the second session, South Africa lost steady wickets on a surface that got faster as the day wore on.

Verreynne said getting the wickets of Steve Smith and Boland late in the day had given his side some hope of salvaging something from the match.

AFP



Sinisa Mihajlovic

Mihajlovic dies at 53 after battling leukemia

Rome, Italy - Sinisa Mihajlovic died at the age of 53 on Friday after leukemia finally got the better of a charismatic and controversial figure who was one of the most recognisable players from the golden age of Serie A.

Serb Mihajlovic, a powerful defender and mercurial set-piece taker, passed away in Rome after spending most of his adult life in Italy, where he was revered for his play and reviled for his friendship with notorious Serbian nationalist paramilitary warlord Arkan.

His wife Arianna and their five children deplored the "unjust and premature death" of Mihajlovic who played for numerous clubs in Italy.

AFP



England's Rehan Ahmed (C) celebrates with teammates after taking a Pakistan wicket on Saturday (AFP)

Leach, Ahmed shine for England on a spinners' day in third Pakistan Test

Karachi, Pakistan - Spinners Jack Leach and teenager Rehan Ahmed shared six wickets between them as England dismissed Pakistan for 304 Saturday on the opening day of the third and final Test in Karachi.

Leach grabbed 4-140 and Ahmed finished with 2-89 as Pakistan batters spoiled good starts after Babar Azam won the toss and batted on a turning National Stadium pitch.

But England also fell prey to spin, with mystery tweaker Abrar Ahmed trapping Zak Crawley without scoring before the visi-

tors closed the day on 7-1.

Ben Duckett and Ollie Pope were at the crease with four and three respectively as England trail by 297 runs.

England lead the three-match series 2-0.

Skipper Azam top-scored for Pakistan with 78 before running himself out, while Agha Salman made 56.

But the start of the day belonged to Ahmed - who at 18 years and 126 days old became the youngest England player to start a Test - when he dismissed Saud Shakeel for 23 in his seventh

over. Before Ahmed, Brian Close was the youngest England debutant at 18 years and 149 days when he played against New Zealand in 1949.

Leach then came into the act, breaking a stubborn eighth wicket stand of 48 between Salman and Nauman Ali (20).

In the morning session, Pakistan lost Abdullah Shafique (eight), Shan Masood (30) and Azhar Ali (40) before Azam and Shakeel looked to have steadied the innings with a 45-run fourth wicket stand.

AFP

Goalkeeper injured as fans invade pitch in Melbourne derby

Melbourne, Australia - An Australian A-League clash between Melbourne Victory and Melbourne City was abandoned Saturday after "shocking" scenes when fans stormed the pitch and attacked a goalkeeper, who suffered a suspected concussion.

The match was called off in the first half after a fan protest against a decision this week by league bosses to award the grand finals se-



ries to Sydney for the next three years turned violent.

Supporters of both sides were planning to walk out at the 20-minute mark, but Victory fans turned on City goalkeeper Tom Glover after he appeared to throw a flare back towards them.

Moments earlier a flare had hit a television cameraman on the back, local reports said.

Scores of fans invaded the pitch and one grabbed a metal bucket and threw it into Glover's face as scuffles broke out and a group of men swung on the crossbar.

FIFA chief announces plans for 32-team Club World Cup

Doha, Qatar - FIFA chief Gianni Infantino announced plans on Friday for a 32-team Club World Cup from 2025, despite reported opposition from Europe's biggest clubs.

An expansion of the competition has long been a pet project of Infantino's. A 24-team event, featuring eight sides from Europe, was planned for 2021 in China but was put on hold due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Infantino said the new-look

tournament would be even bigger than first planned.

"We had agreed a few years ago to have a new 24-team men's Club World Cup," the FIFA president said at the World Cup in Doha on Friday.

"It should have taken place in 2021 but was postponed because of Covid. The new competition will take place in 2025 and will feature 32 teams, making it really like a World Cup."

Reports in the British media



Gianni Infantino

this week said European clubs had rejected FIFA's proposal to launch the new-look competition.

The plan drew a furious reaction from players' union FIFPRO.

It said in a statement that despite an 'understanding' with FIFA that there would be "a joint negotiation of the international match calendar" at the FIFA Congress in March 2023 "these decisions were taken unilaterally without seriously consulting, let

alone agreeing, with the players."

FIFPRO said the new format as well as planned changes to the formats of the men's and women's World Cups "have created new conditions that further increase pressure on players' workload and their jobs."

The plans are for an expanded tournament to be held every four years instead of annually, as is the case for the current seven-team event.

AFP